Sinclair Lewis and the American 1920s
Main Street, Babbitt and Arrowsmith

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A Thesis presented to
the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages
the University of Oslo
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master's Degree
Spring Term 2007

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INTRODUCTION

Approaching Sinclair Lewis

Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane, the editors of *The Man from Main Street: Selected Essays and Other Writings of Sinclair Lewis*, introduce that collection of Lewis's work by observing:

> We believe that it does hold intimations of one outstanding fact, that Sinclair Lewis perhaps exerted a more profound influence upon the United States of America than any other writer of his time. The critics may debate the niceties of his style; the literary historians may place him in an orderly niche. The fact remains that Lewis's books roused the world to a better understanding of America and affected the course of our national thinking about America and Americans. We venture to prophesy that, a century from now, literate people will look to Sinclair Lewis to tell what his country was like in those amazing four decades from 1910 to 1950.[1]

During the 1920s, at the peak of his career, Lewis managed to capture the spirit of contemporary America in his writing. Both *Main Street* and *Babbitt* presented Americans, especially those who belonged to the middle class, with a picture of their society which they could recognize and accept as true. Recognition was part of the appeal of these novels; finally, someone had come along and described life as a great many Americans actually experienced it. America adopted "main street" and "babbitt" as concepts. In many ways, Lewis was a product of his times. At the same time, he shaped the consciousness of his fellow Americans and influenced the way they perceived themselves.

When I first approached Lewis and decided to write about three of his novels, *Main Street*, *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*, my perspective had a historical slant. My main interest was not the novels *per se*, but American society in the 1920s. I was hoping that reading Lewis would open up a door to the past, that it would be possible to gain a better understanding of what it was like to live in America during that fascinating decade, which has been described through catch phrases such as "The Golden Twenties," "The Roaring Twenties" and "The Jazz Age." I believe that an author cannot escape his context, that his work will somehow reflect the culture which has nurtured him and the conditions under which he wrote. As I went

[1] *The Man from Main Street* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1954), p. xii.

along, however, I began to realize that Lewis was not interested in drawing an accurate and detailed map of his contemporary America. Through his satire he seemed determined to expose much of what he did not appreciate in American society. His portrayal of America was not meant to be comprehensive or "objective." He wrote about the middle class, *for* the middle class. Many of the so-called "Lost Generation" writers wrote about a quite different reality. It is significant here that Lewis belonged to an older generation of writers than, for instance, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. It seems that he wanted to shake his audience into an awareness of their situation, to change their attitudes and awaken their moral consciousness.

Even though his motifs vary from novel to novel, Lewis's main themes do not seem to change very much. According to James Lundquist, "Lewis was ultimately concerned with the question of how to live in American culture of the 1920s rather than with what that culture was like."[2] To me, this seems basically true. In *Main Street*, *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*, Lewis examines the conditions of American society and explores different possibilities for the individual to cope with those conditions. The social climate of the 1920s makes it almost impossible for someone like Babbitt, that is, a white, middle-class, middle-aged man, to define himself and on his own terms create a personal and original meaning in his life; self-realization becomes impossible when society expects you to live up to certain conventions and standards. Even if Lewis was not an existentialist writer *per se*, his lifelong task was the exposure of the conditions which prevent the healthy growth and development of the individual. In his novels, he addresses the question "What is wrong with America?" How can anyone hope to find meaning and a positive and fulfilling purpose in such a stifling environment – an environment that requires the individual to give up his search for a meaningful existence and give in to conformity? When standardization is the norm, how can anyone venture to be different? And at what cost? When life no longer makes satisfactory

[2] *Sinclair Lewis* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1973), p. 35.

sense, we try to make sense of it anyhow. It seems to me that Lewis, through his characters, asks the question, "What is life really all about?" The answers provided by society do not satisfy him. Materialism, consumerism, standardization, and conformity – striving to achieve material wealth, surrounding themselves with gadgets and conveniences, trying to be like one another, Americans keep themselves busy and are thus distracted from questioning the value of their endeavors. They seem to be afraid to stand alone and face the most disturbing question of them all: "Why are we here? What is the purpose of our existence?"

My contention is that Lewis was a social critic who used his observational skills and his knack for satire to expose a situation that he did not find satisfactory. In the novels that I have chosen for my study, he sought to expose the attitudes and values that in his opinion made it impossible to be a truly free individual. He perceived that personal liberty comes with restrictions, that society places obstacles in our way and keeps us from exerting our freedom. My task is thus twofold: I need to comment on both the way Lewis portrays American society and the way he develops his characters. There is a dynamic to his writing, as the environment affects the characters who in turn try to change their environment. It could perhaps best be described as a tug-of-war; the forces of society pull in one direction while the individual pulls in another. Lewis's characters have to measure their strength in a fight which seems lost even before it has started. Starting with his main theme, the frustrated individual who in vain tries to challenge his or her environment, my aim is also to say something about what seems to be Lewis's purpose here.

Relevant Critical Theories and Methods

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the increasing popularity of New Historicism once again made it legitimate to talk about the context of a text, after the New Critics had focused exclusively on the text itself for a long time. History and literature were no longer necessarily

separated, but were reunited in order that they might shed mutual light on each other. Most historical documents are written ones; that is basically how history is preserved and transmitted over the centuries. Literature is both shaped by history and itself shapes history. The production of texts is necessarily situated within a specific historical situation. Even though a text is not fixed in that situation, in the sense that its later reception might offer new interpretations and thus change its meaning, we cannot ignore the circumstances in which a text was written. This also brings the author back into the picture. His or her life experience, not to say their situation at the time they wrote the text in question, will inevitably color the product of their endeavors. However, even though text and context are inseparable, history is obviously not available to us in any form that would make it possible to recreate some kind of objective historical background which might explain a literary text in any definitive way.

New Historicism is a development of Historicism and thus shares an awareness of the fact that writing history involves interests far beyond those of retrieving some sort of objective past. History is always reconstructed and rewritten in the present, and is thus necessarily also a reflection of our own culture. According to John Brannigan, the historicist critics realized that "the kind of history which we constructed in the present represented as much a view of ourselves in the present as of those in the past."[3] Understanding the past is an interpretive act. We turn to the past to find answers, also to explain modern phenomena, to find affirmation of our beliefs, to explain the order of the world, or to justify our conduct. Thus, we tend to construct a narrative of the past which fits our own interests. Ultimately, historicists and New Historicists alike are interested in "the significance of the past for the present."[4] The historicist approach to literature centers on dialogue, not just between the text and the critic but also between the text and other texts. The historicist critic perceives a cultural distance between himself and the past he seeks to understand, but it is exactly this

[3] *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 30.
[4] *Ibid*, p. 6.

encounter between two cultures which has caught his interest.[5] I find that in choosing to view the past as a foreign yet potentially understandable culture, New Historicists seem to believe that it is possible to enter into dialogue with the past. The past thus becomes available to us; the past is not a territory so foreign that it makes no sense to us in the present. From my standpoint, when studying Lewis, it seems that even though the 1920s belongs to our relatively recent past and thus is not as foreign to us as for instance the Renaissance, I face the same risk as any other critic: trying to access the past of Lewis's novels I bring them into my own context and remodel them partly to suit my own interests. That is a problem which it seems difficult to escape. However, as long as I follow in the footsteps of New Historicists, who constantly "question and examine the assumptions behind their own interests in the past,"[6] that is perhaps the most viable approach, even if there is always the possibility that in seeking to realize an agenda of his own, the critic is somehow violating the past.

New Historicism is more than a rediscovery of the dynamic interchange between literature and history. The "new" of New Historicism represents a new agenda. The concern with power relations and how those relations are expressed in literature has political implications. Power is not easy to define, but the concept of power implies an imbalance between those who are in control and those who are controlled, between those who dominate and those who are dominated. As I understand New Historicism, power is a force in society, a separate entity which almost takes on a life of its own. It pervades all human activity, including the production of art. According to Brannigan, power includes subversion and all attempts at subversion: "Power can only define itself in relation to subversion, to what is alien or other, and at the heart of power is therefore the production and subsequent containment of subversion."[7] This is not to say that resistance is futile, but even so, resistance somehow seems to benefit power, that is, power depends upon subversion for its own sustenance. In

[5] See Brannigan, pp. 31-32.
[6] *Ibid*, p. 31.
[7] *Ibid*, p. 64.

order for power to assert its own position, it needs resistance. The only way to stay in control is by repeatedly defeating any opponents. It seems that power influences representations of subversion, for instance, in literature, distorting the image to make power appear the most appealing alternative and thus gaining the public's support. It follows that even though literature explores possibilities for subversion, in doing so literature does not undermine power but rather affirms power. If I wanted this assumption to apply to Lewis, it would be possible to argue that his America was ruled by the forces of capitalism and that he wrote in that context, from inside a capitalist society, reinforcing the power of capitalism by exploring possibilities for subversion and at the same time denying that truly effective subversion is possible. My thesis does perhaps not share the political agenda of some of the leading New Historicists, but I do believe that it would not be natural for me to create some kind of barrier between the author's context and his work, between life and fiction. In his novels, Lewis exposed the forces that are at work in society, and he portrayed individuals who try to break free from the restrictions placed upon them by society. Whether or not the fact that these characters ultimately fail to change their situation is an indication that Lewis did not believe that it was possible to really undermine the ruling forces, is a question I will return to in my analysis of these three novels.

To summarize New Historicism, these critics are to a large extent concerned with "the power relations of past societies."[8] They subscribe to "the practice of reading texts as participants in the construction of human beliefs and ideologies"[9] and believe that "[a]ll texts, all documents, are representations of the beliefs, values and forms of power circulating in a society at a given time in specific circumstances."[10] Literature interacts with history and the task of New Historicism seems to be the exposure of "the ideological and political interests

[8] Brannigan, p. 9.
[9] *Ibid*, p. 21.
[10] *Ibid*, p. 132.

operating through literary texts."[11] I share the belief that literary texts necessarily reveal something about the context in which they were produced, but it is not my intention to treat power relations in particular. My interest in Lewis is focused on the social criticism he offered in his writing. His novels reflect his contemporary society and, it seems fair to assume, necessarily deal with "the beliefs, values and forms of power" that he observed and experienced. Part of my task is to examine the way he represents American society of the 1920s, getting at the underlying beliefs, values and attitudes that he wanted to expose. Both presenting his readers with a vivid picture of how the forces of society operate and, at the same time, objecting to the current state of affairs, Lewis is clearly advocating a certain ideology. Ironically, rather than alienating the people he satirized and ridiculed in his writing, that is, the middle class and especially the new "class" of tired businessmen, they embraced him as one of their own. As I have already mentioned, Lewis provided these people with a set of ideas and concepts that shaped their perception of themselves. Engaging with Lewis's writing in order to gain a better understanding of American society and the American consciousness, seems to fit in with the way New Historicists practice literary criticism.

John Brannigan also offers a critique of New Historicism and its cousin, Cultural Materialism. One of the weaknesses he points to is the fact that these critics are "concerned with a political agenda which is not immediately appropriate or accessible to the literary text."[12] I would have to agree that if a critic has a very definite political agenda, he might fall prey to his own cause. That is, his personal interests may override those of the text in question. There is a discrepancy here, which may be expressed as "the extent to which the past differs from contemporary uses of the past."[13] Discussing Lewis, it is perhaps possible to cover up any such violation of the texts simply because our modern contemporary society in many ways resembles American society of the 1920s. Our standards for success are still more

[11] Brannigan, p. 11.
[12] *Ibid*, p. 114.
[13] *Ibid*, p. 119.

or less tied up with material prosperity. Success is measured in terms of material wealth, that is, the size of your house, the car you drive, the size of your paycheck. Most people strive toward that same goal: to be well off in terms of material goods. The majority of people expects and desires a certain standard of living, and if anyone fails to live up to that standard, they are immediately labeled as failures. In such a social climate, the pressure on the individual to conform is tremendous. Perhaps it is fair to say that our present materialism, our fascination with all kinds of gadgets and conveniences, and our criteria for success, were born during those years following World War I. Thus it is easy, even tempting, to turn to the 1920s and to some extent also catch a glimpse of ourselves. In any case, the New Historicists are opposed to the practice of imposing our own values on a text and attempt to read texts "in relation to their historical context."[14] That is my ambition as well. I want to read Lewis's novels in relation to the American 1920s, and to try to perceive the period as much as possible on its own terms. I obviously have no aspirations towards comprehensiveness, however, since there are many aspects of the 1920s that are only peripheral in Lewis's writing, like labor unrest, the flapper and Prohibition.

When choosing a thematic approach to these three novels, I soon realized that this is an approach that needs to be defended because theme is such an elusive term and thus has been considered, especially by some modern literary theoreticians, a bad starting point for literary criticism. In his essay on "Thematics and Historical Evidence," Thomas Pavel draws our attention to a recurrent problem, namely that "we tend to pay attention to topics that we, rather than the texts, care about."[15] Inevitably, the critic brings with him his own horizon of understanding when approaching a text and his own interests will direct his gaze as he seeks to abstract a theme from the text. He cannot escape his context, any more than an author can. However, it does not necessarily follow that the critic is free to violate the text by imposing

[14] Brannigan, p. 121.
[15] In *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, ed. Werner Sollors (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 121.

his own concerns upon it. He has to work with the material at hand; the language of the text is a fact that severely limits its potential meaning. The text itself provides the frames for interpretation. That is our only safeguard against total relativism. The author has, through his use of language, attempted to control our reading of the text.[16] As Theodore Wolpers argues, themes are not "mere abstractions," but are rather "inherent in some of the motifs and the language used"; theme is "one of the shaping forces and guiding principles of the text, not something the critic adds from outside."[17] The text tries to redirect our gaze, to make us take an interest in something that may or may not be alien to our worldview. In the words of Pavel, "we need not reduce literature to a projection screen for our interests." Instead, we "should learn how to recover the topics that older texts were designed to make us care about."[18] Older cultures are necessarily more or less alien to us, and we cannot expect to retrieve the past directly. It seems impossible to read a text wholly the way its author intended, or even to approach it as it was first read by a contemporary audience. But we can attempt to bridge the gap between past and present. By bringing our text into dialogue with other texts, we might be able to construct a fuller and more accurate picture of the past and thus get an idea of how that text was first received, what it meant back then as opposed to what it means today.

One of the points Pavel is getting at in his essay is the fact that the critic needs to look outside the text for evidence that will support his interpretive claims. In other words, "we need independent evidence."[19] However, trying to defend our position by using historical evidence, perhaps the most common method, is in itself problematic because "historical evidence can itself be treated thematically."[20] That is to say, when I in my research have chosen to read various sources that would provide me with a broader scope and a more diverse impression of the American 1920s, I have to keep in mind that any history book might

[16] See Claude Bremond, "Concept and Theme," in *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, pp. 55-56.
[17] "Motif and Theme as Structural Content Units," in *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, pp. 89-90.
[18] "Thematics and Historical Evidence," p. 145.
[19] *Ibid*, p. 121.
[20] *Ibid*, p. 122.

also be subjective and biased in its presentation of a given period. However, as my goal is obviously not to present a historically correct and objective picture of the 1920s, but rather to understand why and how Lewis satirized his contemporaries, what he was trying to tell America about herself, the question of historical evidence becomes secondary. Even so, I have learned a great deal from the work of others, both literary critics and historians. Their interpretations of Lewis and of the period constitute important building blocks in the construction of my thesis.

It seems to me that the best any critic can do is to bring with him an awareness of his own situation in his meeting with a given work. The critic thus brings the text into his own context. His desire to stay true to the text may not prevent him from molding it to better suit his own interests, but this desire will at least keep him from consciously violating the text, and rather inspire him to pay close attention to the frames for interpretation provided by the structure and language of the text itself. The past is only accessible to us through texts that have been preserved and transmitted. History demands interpretation. Any attempt at reconstructing the past as it once was must fail simply because we cannot transport ourselves back to the period of time in question. However, it does not necessarily follow that we cannot learn anything about the past through our reading of literature. Even if the past as I encounter it in Sinclair Lewis's writing seems to corroborate certain of my own personal beliefs, this does not mean that I am somehow mistaken in my assumptions. It rather seems to indicate that interpretation involves selection of some kind. Thus, in choosing to emphasize certain aspects of Lewis's novels, my reconstruction of the American 1920s can only be partial, just as subjective as anything ever written in or of that period.

In his essay "Literary Histories and the Themes of Literature," David Perkins defends thematic interpretation by claiming that theme is a suitable category when organizing the

history of literature.[21] In literary history, theme might serve as a principle by which to group texts. Rather than using author, nationality, literary period, and so forth to determine where to place a text within literary history, themes might help us see connections that were not obvious to us beforehand. Themes develop over time. If all literature somehow is indebted to earlier literature, grouping texts according to theme would make that development visible. Perkins believes that one objection to this approach might be that themes "link works rather than authors."[22] Literary history would thus seem less orderly than we are used to seeing it. One author might appear in more than one group, and he might have more in common with a writer from a different period or even a different nation than he has with his contemporary countrymen. Likewise, a work might have more than one dominant theme and thus belong to several groups.

In my case, thematic categories work like a charm when comparing *Main Street, Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*. The themes I have chosen to emphasize in my analysis make it possible to draw parallels between these novels and help me see a development in Lewis's authorship. Geographically speaking, he covers a lot of ground, something which allows him to approach his subject from slightly different angles. In *Main Street* he establishes the scene, so to speak, which he then elaborates on in *Babbitt,* before reaching a conclusion in *Arrowsmith.* However, the American scene is only the stage upon which the real drama of his novels takes place. The tensions in society are primarily expressed through tensions in the individual. Lewis's protagonists all seem to face the same predicament, but the way they handle their situation differs from novel to novel, as I will return to later. The same applies to Lewis's treatment of his subject, perhaps most evident in his development of characters, but also in his tone. Although *Main Street* contains some satire, Lewis's satirical streak does not reach its climax until *Babbitt*. In *Arrowsmith,* the author seems to have toned down his satire in favor

[21] In *The Return of Thematic Criticism,* pp. 109-120.
[22] *Ibid*, p. 113.

of a more earnest depiction of his hero. Thus, despite the striking resemblance in theme, it might be fair to conclude that Lewis moved on from an initial diagnosis on the condition of America, through a thorough investigation of that condition, and to a final judgment.

CHAPTER ONE

Main Street: Small-Town America

In *Main Street*, Elizabeth Stevenson says, Sinclair Lewis "held up a mirror of satire and longing to a whole people"[23] and thus provided not only his contemporaries but also the generations to come with a vivid image of what American small-town life was like during the first decades of the 20th century. Perhaps *Main Street* only makes sense if we consider the historical context, that is, the transition from the old pioneer society of the 19th century to a new and modern society in the 20th century. Particularly the more rural districts were lagging behind, struggling to adjust to a new way of life. The inhabitants of small towns such as Gopher Prairie were trying to reconcile their own values and standards with those of a new age. They were clinging to their customs and traditions, to what seemed familiar and safe.[24] The attitudes we find in Gopher Prairie need to be contrasted with the experiences of a younger generation, that is, the people who came of age during World War I and thus were shaped by it, the people whose reality was that of a world in which the old values no longer seemed suitable to provide them with a framework for their lives.[25]

The people of Gopher Prairie are simply trying to cope with the demands of a new age. It is the never-ending struggle between old and new. The young are not satisfied with the status quo; they reject the values of the parent generation. They go searching for new ways to make sense of life. The middle-aged find themselves torn between the customs and traditions handed down to them from, in this case, the age of the pioneers and the changing conditions of society.[26] These inherited values and attitudes are inadequate, but as long as they are not overthrown in favor of new ones, the older generation is unable to move forward with the

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[23] *Babbitts and Bohemians: The American 1920s* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 68.
[24] See William E. Lenchtenburg, "A Paradoxical Generation," in *The Social and Cultural Life of the 1920s*, ed. Ronald L. Davis (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 126.
[25] See Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), pp. 9 and 18-19.
[26] See Walter Lippmann, "Sinclair Lewis," in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Schorer (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 90.

currents of change. Old people, like Mr. and Mrs. Perry in *Main Street*, are given over to resignation. They have witnessed so many life-altering advances, so much progress in terms of the standard of living, that they are no longer able to keep up the pace. They cling to their old beliefs because they need a feeling of stability and permanence.

"This is America…"[27] Sinclair Lewis's introduction sets the tone for the novel we are about to read. "The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana," he continues. He will assert and reassert the notion that Gopher Prairie is only one of many, that there are thousands of American villages just like this one. The environment and the people depicted here are representative of every small town across the country. According to T. K. Whipple, Lewis's "interest is in social types and classes rather than in individuals as human beings."[28] I agree that the voices of his minor characters blend so that we no longer hear the individual speaker but only hear the voice of conformity. The individual members of a community are merged into one indistinct crowd, all pulling in the same direction, making the wheels of society go round. This is not to say that these characters do not have features that make it possible to tell them apart. On the contrary, Lewis draws a number of colorful portraits and is careful to provide his characters with quirks and peculiarities. It seems more appropriate to label them as caricatures rather than types. A type is a character defined by one personal trait and often meant to represent an idea or a concept, e.g. Evil or Good. The term "caricature" entails exaggeration and distortion of personal traits, but the character is not necessarily as one-sided as a type. Lewis's characters have more personality and are more rounded than the term "type" would imply. However, they seem to share more or less the same convictions and opinions. Thus, they represent a class and its prevalent attitudes, and that is their function in the novels. At any rate, Lewis's protagonists, such as Carol Kennicott, should be sufficient evidence of Lewis's ambition to create memorable and believable characters, who are, or at

[27] Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, a Signet Classic (New York: New American Library, 1998), p. 15. Future page references are to this edition, and are included in parentheses in the text.
[28] "Sinclair Lewis," in *A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 77.

least attempt to be, individuals. The way he portrays them and their environment, they stand alone against everyone else. They try to assert their right to be different, to be more than just another face in the crowd, to define who they are and what they want to be irrespective of majority opinion.

Lewis wanted to challenge his readers and their preconceptions about small-town life. His own childhood had taught him that small-town friendliness and neighborliness went only skin-deep, that underneath the surface there was cruelty and pettiness.[29] Up to this point, the predominant literary tradition had nurtured a faulty picture of village life as idyllic.[30] Only a few writers had hinted at a different reality, and Lewis picked up their torch, determined to expose the hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness that he had experienced as a boy in Sauk Centre. Lewis's own introduction to *Main Street* is almost like a declaration of his intentions, with phrases like "the climax of civilization" and "our comfortable tradition and sure faith" obviously meant as a mockery of certain attitudes. "Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?" (15). The tone is satirical; we already know what to expect.

From the very beginning Carol is disheartened and dismayed by the prospect of life in Gopher Prairie. She never quite recovers from her first shock when encountering the dreariness of Main Street. On her first walk through town, everything strikes her as dull, gray, filthy, with a sense of temporariness, as if the houses she sees are only shelters and not homes, as if the town has never managed to rise above a pioneer settlement. She rather expects the people to be "as drab as their houses, as flat as their fields" (42). The trouble seems to be her preconceived ideas of "village charm" (47). Her husband, Will, does not share her gloomy convictions: "But you'll come to like it so much – life's so free here and best people on earth"

[29] See Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 43.
[30] *Ibid*, p. 271.

(44). Later, Carol learns that the villagers take great pride in their town, that they see it as advancement from those not-so-good, old pioneer days. Mrs. Perry, who was among the first people to settle down in Gopher Prairie, is very enthusiastic: "And don't you think it's sweet now? All the trees and lawns? And such comfy houses, and hot-water heat and electric lights and telephones and cement walks and everything?" (153). Carol meets the same response everywhere: there is nothing wrong with Gopher Prairie; it looks just fine the way it is. The townspeople do not perceive, as she does, that compared to the big cities, Gopher Prairie has lagged behind in terms of progress.

We are presented with Carol's view of Gopher Prairie, that is, we get the outsider's perspective on small-town life. Her judgments inevitably color our own;[31] only occasionally is the picture balanced when someone like Will or Vida Sherwin, the teacher, states their case in favor of the town. Lewis apparently sides with Carol, but these other characters offer his reservations about some of her rather harsh and uncompromising opinions. Lewis does seem to suggest that "we must be careful to make a balanced assessment of the small town."[32] He offers his criticism of the American small town, but his ambivalence towards his subject matter makes it impossible for him to side with Carol once and for all. Mark Schorer writes, "His attitude toward the Middle West is as ambiguous as his attitude toward the middleclass: both drawn as hopelessly narrow, the first is shown finally as somehow the only sensible place, and the second as somehow the only sensible people."[33] Lewis does make an effort to let his readers see that Will is a sensible and decent man; in the end, Carol returns not only to her husband but also to the Middle West, the only place which makes sense to her after her Washington adventure. I believe that when Lewis makes sure that, for instance, Will gets to have his say, he intended his readers to realize that Carol is sometimes foolish and that she is not necessarily right every time, but that the question of who is right and who is wrong is

[31] See D. J. Dooley, *The Art of Sinclair Lewis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 67.
[32] *Ibid*, p. 64.
[33] *An American Life*, p. 295.

somehow beside the point. Everyone should be allowed an opinion, regardless. It should not be necessary for anyone to hide their true feelings or compromise their ideals. But in a small town, unless you want to remain an outsider, you have to surrender your values and adopt the standards of the community.

The people of Gopher Prairie are so set in their ways that they are not interested in new ideas.[34] They do not see any need for change. Why fix something that is not broken? The villagers never question their own values, never ask what is achieved by these rigid beliefs. There is a right way to do things, and every other way is necessarily wrong. In the words of Stevenson, "there was a simple, coherent, known way of doing things," that is, a small-town community constitutes "a vastly ignorant as well as a secure civilization."[35] Carol only wants these people to see that there is more than one way to approach life; there are new and exciting things that cannot be dismissed without at least being given a chance. At the same time, Lewis hints at the notion that Carol is too narrow-minded to see things from the villagers' perspective. She insists that she is the one who has to compromise herself and her ideals, and that the villagers refuse to meet her half-way. But she never really tries to change her attitudes either; she continues to believe that their lives are dull and uninspired, and that if they only would allow her to do so, she could somehow enrich and improve their lives. If Carol fails to convince them that her way is the better way, her convictions also remain the same throughout: they are wrong and she is right.[36] The townspeople do not see themselves as provincial and rustic, the way Carol perceives them. In fact, they do make an effort to be cultured. For instance, the Thanatopsis manages to cover all the English poets in one meeting. Thus, "Gopher Prairie had finished the poets. It was ready for the next week's labor: English

[34] See Whipple, p. 72.
[35] *Babbitts and Bohemians*, p. 12.
[36] See Martin Light, *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1975), p. 65.

Fiction and Essays" (141). Their idea of culture is somewhat limited and superficial, to put it mildly; they do not seem to really want to broaden their minds.

Carol's first impression of Gopher Prairie is contrasted with that of another newcomer, Bea Sorenson, who has arrived on the same train and is "viewing Main Street at the same time." To her the town is overwhelmingly large; she marvels at the fact that there are "so many folks all in one place at the same time" (54). Her background allows her to experience Main Street as lovely, impressive, almost glamorous. She finds that "[i]t was worth while working for nothing, to be allowed to stay here" (55). Gopher Prairie is a major step up from life on the farm; it offers opportunities that Bea has never in her life imagined. To Carol, however, Gopher Prairie can only fall short in comparison to the life she has lived in St. Paul. No doubt, "[w]hat you see in Main Street will depend on what you are; it all depends on who is looking at it."[37] It all comes down to a question of perspectives; Carol is on the outside looking in at a community she cannot understand because her values and her take on life are so fundamentally different. At the same time, the members of that community are so set in their ways, so smug and self-satisfied, that they are unable to interpret her criticisms as anything but an attack on their values.

In a supposedly classless society, Gopher Prairie is curiously class-divided. There is indeed a "visible chasm between the rich and the poor", as society is divided into "two clearly discernible levels if not classes, the privileged and the underprivileged." Clearly, there is also a "distinction between the native-born and the naturalized."[38] There is an elite of the middle-class and well-to-do people, and they are very careful not to let just anyone inside their circle. Carol belongs to this layer of society and is therefore rarely exposed to those less fortunate than herself, that is, the farmers, the common workers, and the poor. She observes that "[t]hey will be cordial to me because my man belongs to their tribe. God help me if I were an

[37] Lippmann, pp. 86-87.
[38] Stevenson, p. 10.

outsider!" (67). Early on, Carol experiences the snobbery and hypocrisy of the "wealthy." She is puzzled by the fact that her husband socializes with his tailor, Nat Hicks, and inquires, "Would you go hunting with your barber, too?" Will's reply is revealing: "No but – No use running this democracy thing into the ground" (57). Like most people in town, Will has a sense of his own social position; he disapproves of Carol's bringing their son to play with Olaf, considering the Bjornstams "low company" for his son (335). There is something slightly ridiculous about the haughtiness and self-importance displayed by the "good people." Lewis obviously wants his readers to recognize that their patronizing attitude toward the farmers and workers is not justified.

At her welcome party, Carol ventures the topic of labor trouble. Stowbody, the president of the Ionic bank, is relieved that "we ain't got the labor trouble they have in these cities." Obviously, this is not entirely true; the difference seems to be that here the workers are kept in check. When asked "Do you approve of union labor?" (65), the men all seem to agree that they do not want some outsider butting into their business; they are strongly opposed to socialist ideas. As several critics have observed, the villagers repeatedly reveal themselves through speech.[39] The attitudes they display and the opinions they give vent to convict them of their hypocrisy. Carol's accusations seem just; the bankers, shopkeepers, lawyers, doctors, in brief, the prominent villagers are only interested in protecting their money from falling into the hands of those who actually contribute to producing their wealth. They even go as far as denying the reality of poverty, claiming that the workers and farmers are slackers who try to exploit their employers. When someone like Kennicott speaks up against the dangers of socialism, this is merely an expression of fear that the farmers and workers might somehow get hold of their share of both money and power.[40]

[39] See Dooley, p. 142, and James Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis: 1920-1930* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 21.
[40] See Stevenson, p. 18.

Through Carol's friendship with Bea and Miles we get a feeling of what it is like to strive for prosperity and social position when you come from a humble background. D. J Dooley observes that "Miles and Bea Bjornstam *are* outsiders, and to them no quarter is extended."[41] Bea is a good friend to Carol, a good wife and mother, who takes pride in her home and would have liked to entertain guests, but no matter what they do, she and her husband remain outsiders, socially unacceptable. Miles' efforts to be respectable, working his way up from a hired hand to owning his own dairy, are of no consequence. The village cannot forget his impudence, his rudeness, his straight-out indigestible opinions and behavior. As for Bea, she can never escape her ancestry; she will always be a Scandinavian immigrant. In this town, only those who have lived in America for generations or earn a certain amount of money a year are welcomed into the higher circles of society.

In a town like Gopher Prairie, everyone knows everything about everyone. The villagers talk behind each other's backs, always reveling in gossip, digging out dirt. Nothing pleases them more than to bring someone else down from their high horse; nothing tastes sweeter than someone else's misfortune. There is an obvious irony in Mrs. Bogart's question, "Don't you think it's awful, the way folks talk in this town?" (203), before she launches straight into town gossip. At Sunday dinner with Aunt Bessie and Uncle Whittier, discussing Erik Valborg, Carol observes, "Isn't it wonderful how much we all know about one another in a town like this…" (353). Knowing that she is being watched, Carol consequently feels self-conscious and often finds herself posing or restraining herself to avoid criticism.[42] She imagines the villagers gossiping about her; she fancies them spying on her from behind closed curtains. Vida prompts her to be cautious: "I wonder if you understand that in a secluded community like this every newcomer is on test? People cordial to her but watching her all the time" (111).

[41] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 69.
[42] See Whipple, p. 78.

From Vida Carol learns what the townspeople really think of her: “Of course the illiterate ones resent your references to anything farther away than Minneapolis. They’re so suspicious – that’s it, suspicious. And some think you dress too well.” This is only the beginning of it. They think she is “showing off,” that she’s “too frivolous,” “patronizing” (112), too “chummy” with Bea, “eccentric in furnishing this room” (113), and that she doesn’t go to church as often as she should. All of this only proves to Carol how false and two-faced these people can be. They feel threatened by her, but they gloss everything over by being friendly while secretly backstabbing her. Even though she only means well, they feel that she sees herself as superior to them, that she is trying to show them that she can do things better. Obviously, this makes them very defensive and hostile, not to say intent on preserving their customs and traditions. The villagers do not welcome newcomers and refuse to embrace them as part of their own crowd; they are prejudiced and suspicious.

Visiting Joralemon, Carol is discouraged to find that it is just another Gopher Prairie. Will and Dr. Calibree “gave the social passwords of Main Street, the orthodox opinions on weather, crops, and motor cars, then flung away restraint and gyrated in the debauch of shop-talk” (322). It is as if they have not left home at all:

> She saw that in adventuring from Main Street, Gopher Prairie, to Main Street, Joralemon, she had not stirred. There were the same two-story brick groceries with lodge-signs above the awnings; the same one-story wooden millinery shop; the same fire-brick garages; the same prairie at the open end of the wide street; the same people wondering whether the levity of eating a hot-dog sandwich would break their taboos. (324-325)

Will not surprisingly finds that Joralemon is “an enterprising town,” while Carol declares it to be “an ash-heap” (325). Wherever Carol goes, she is never able to escape Main Street. Traveling around California for 3 ½ months, she and Will encounter all the tourists who “having traveled thousands of miles from their familiar villages, hasten to secure an illusion of not having left them” (424). Even in Washington Carol is haunted by Main Street; the members of Tincomb Methodist Church seek community with likeminded spirits, keeping up the traditions and customs they have brought with them from their respective home towns.

Through her extensive reading, Carol is finally able to express what is wrong with America. She has only found two traditions of the American small town in the literature she has read, and both of these traditions offer a faulty picture. In her experience, the American village does not remain "the one sure abode of friendship, honesty, and clean sweet marriageable girls" (283). Nor is it true that "the significant features of all villages are whiskers, iron dogs upon lawns, gold bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cat-tails, and shrewd comic old men who are known as 'hicks' and who ejaculate 'Waal I swaan.'" Rather,

> Carol's small town thinks not in hoss-swapping but in cheap motor cars, telephones, ready-made clothes, silos, alfalfa, kodaks, phonographs, leather-upholstered Morris chairs, bridge-prizes, oil-stocks, motion-pictures, land-deals, unread sets of Mark Twain, and a chaste version of national politics.

There are plenty of young women and men who are discontent with such a "standardized" life, a life dictated by "the desire to appear respectable." Carol complains that it is "the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking." It is "the prohibition of happiness," a condition of "slavery self-sought and self-defended." Ultimately, "[i]t is dullness made God." The key-word seems to be "mechanical" living (284).

Carol used to find hope in "the feeble exotic quality to be found in the first-generation Scandinavians," but she has witnessed how quickly they have been "Americanized into uniformity, and in less than a generation losing in the grayness whatever pleasant new customs they might have added to the life of the town." To her own dismay, she finds that "along with these foreigners, she felt herself being ironed into glossy mediocrity" (285). Lewis later repeated the same observation, that "the Scandinavians Americanise only too quickly," that "[t]hey permit their traditions to be snatched away."[43] Whatever these newcomers to America might have contributed to diversify a standardized society, it is soon lost forever.

[43] "Minnesota, the Norse State," in *The Man from Main Street*, p. 225.

It appears that all small towns in all countries are the same,[44] but in Carol's opinion this condition is somehow worse in America, "a country which is taking pains to become altogether standardized and pure" and will not be "satisfied until the entire world also admits that the end and joyous purpose of living is to ride in flivvers" (286). The point is that not only do individuals conform to the standards of their town; the towns conform to the standards of the country at large so that nine out of ten American towns look alike. In fact, the houses "are alike in their very attempts at diversity" and "[t]he shops show the same standardized wares." Carol reckons that "[i]f Kennicott were snatched from Gopher Prairie and instantly conveyed to a town leagues away, he would not realize it." In his rather lengthy exposition on the topic of "what is wrong with the American small town?" it seems as if Lewis is using Carol as a mouthpiece in order for him to be able to give his diagnosis on the condition of society.

The 1920s seems to be an era obsessed with the idea of rising in society, to be successful somehow. Everybody wanted to have their fair share. There was an atmosphere of opportunity. Everyone could become a Somebody by an act of sheer willpower, by industry, individual effort, and determination.[45] Ambition was all around. This certainly applies to the citizens of Gopher Prairie as well. They all strive to better the conditions of their lives. However, the social climate of the American small town prevents hard-working people from gaining recognition for their efforts. Democracy does not apply to everyone. Opportunity does not equal social acceptance. Worst of all, at least to someone like Carol and perhaps to someone like Lewis himself, there is no room for individual differences in this kind of environment. "If you're not with us, you're against us." The villagers do not tolerate opinions that differ from their own; they do not value independent thought or creativity. They do not accept deviant behavior and feel threatened by anyone who appears to be different. No

[44] See Sinclair Lewis, "Introduction to *Main Street*," in *The Man from Main Street*, p. 203.
[45] See Stevenson, pp. 16 and 125.

wonder that Carol sometimes feels like she is banging her head against the wall. What she is really opposed to is conformity and standardization, most of all the standardization of mind. She flinches at the idea that everyone has to subscribe to the same standards and values, that there is a norm that must be rigidly followed if one wishes to fit in.

It seems to me that Lewis is not trying to measure one set of values against another, saying that such and such opinions are wrong; rather, he is trying to illustrate how standardization affects the individual and deprives him or her of their freedom. Everyone should have the freedom to choose their own path in life and be entitled to their own opinions. No one should be excluded or discriminated against just because they refuse to live life according to the unwritten rules of society. Lewis's fight is a fight against conformity. Through characters such as Carol, he defends the individual's right to truly be an individual. The plot of *Main Street* thus seems to fit a pattern that reoccurs in many of Lewis's novels.[46] Carol is the maladjusted individual whose rising discontent and sense of something that is missing in her life eventually cause her to rebel. But she is overpowered by her environment; her rebellion is suppressed. She is reeled back in and forced to resign herself to her situation.

As pointed out by several critics, Carol was probably modeled on Lewis's wife Grace, inspired by her first meeting with and response to Sauk Centre.[47] It has also been suggested that Carol is just as much part of Lewis himself, that she *is* Lewis or vice versa.[48] Her struggle is not so much with her environment as it is a struggle with herself. In his writing, Lewis strove to reconcile his romanticism with realism.[49] Likewise, Carol is trying to reconcile her expectations with the reality she faces in Gopher Prairie. Martin Light labels her as a quixotic figure,[50] someone whose perception of the world is colored and informed by her reading. Even though we do not get to hear a lot about her childhood and upbringing, we are told that

[46] See Dooley, p. 97, Hutchisson, p. 14, and Schorer, *An American Life*, p. 289.
[47] See Hutchisson, p. 16, and Light, p. 31.
[48] Schorer, *An American Life*, p. 286.
[49] See Light, pp. 4 and 6.
[50] *Ibid*, pp. 60-72.

her father "let the children read whatever they pleased" (23). In her mind, she has constructed reality to her own liking. But the world can only disappoint her; life can never be like a romance. "Why do these stories lie so? They always make the bride's home-coming a bower of roses. Complete trust in noble spouse. Lies about marriage…," Carol complains (44). However, rather than adjusting her expectations to fit reality, as a true quixotic heroine Carol transmutes reality to better fit her expectations. The way she romanticizes Will's late night calls, turning him into a hero and adventurer, is symptomatic:

> He went out, hungry, chilly, unprotesting; and she, before she fell asleep again, loved him for his sturdiness, and saw the drama of his riding by night to the frightened household on the distant farm; pictured children standing at a window, waiting for him. He suddenly had in her eyes the heroism of a wireless operator on a ship in a collision; of an explorer, fever-clawed, deserted by his bearers, but going on – jungle – going – (195)

Unfortunately, things look different in the morning. Carol realizes that "he was not a hero-scientist but a rather irritable and commonplace man who needed a shave." It is the inevitable confrontation of "[n]ight witchery and morning disillusion" (196). According to Light, "The quixote's problem is one of vision."[51] He, or in this case she, is unable to see things for what they really are. Consequently, "Lewis's books are attempts at correct viewing."[52] Carol needs to recognize that the windmills are not giants, that her illusions must be dispelled. Even if my reading of *Main Street* is not exclusively informed by Light's interpretation, I nevertheless feel that his effort to make sense of Lewis and his work, by placing him in an American tradition of quixotic literature, sheds new and interesting light on the character of Carol and her development.

Why is it that Carol cannot accept the terms of life offered to her in Gopher Prairie? Will seems to believe that he has provided a good life for her. The other members of the community seem to have adjusted well to their environment. Could it be that there is something wrong with Carol, as Guy Pollock suggests? From an early age, she has nurtured

[51] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 3.
[52] *Ibid*, p. 10.

her yearning nature on fiction, thus constructing in her mind a faulty picture of what to expect in life. Her ideas and her idealism are mostly borrowed from the books she has read.[53] In college, Carol accidentally picks up a book that inspires her with the idea of finding one of these prairie villages and making it beautiful. It seems that she wants a purpose in life; she believes that she can make a difference. The trouble is to figure out exactly what to do to realize such an ambition. Walter Lippman seems to believe that part of the problem is that Carol has "the leisure to be troubled."[54] Lewis observes that "[t]hus she chanced to discover that she had nothing to do."

> She could not have outside employment. To the village doctor's wife it was taboo.
> She was a woman with a working brain and no work.
> There were only three things which she could do: Have children; start her career of reforming; or become so definitely a part of the town that she would be fulfilled by the activities of church and study-club and bridge-parties. (101)

Carol is no happier being a doctor's wife in Gopher Prairie than she was being a librarian in St. Paul. Her expectations are never fulfilled. She is forced to recognize over and over again that her efforts are not appreciated. She tries in many ways to reform the town: her housewarming party, outdoor winter sports, the Dramatic Association, the women's restroom, not to mention her suggestion that they ought to build a Georgian town hall. Whatever project she decides on and however much enthusiasm she displays, however, she is never able to evoke the response she desires in the people around her. The villagers will try anything once and assure her that they have had the jolliest time, but then they continue to do things their own way. Every time Carol gets herself all worked up and excited about a new project, the villagers manage to deflate her in a split second:

> At a quarter to three Carol had left home; at half-past four she had created the Georgian town; at a quarter to five she was in the dignified poverty of the Congregational parsonage, her enthusiasm pattering upon Mrs. Leonard Warren like summer rain upon an old gray roof; at two minutes to five a town of demure courtyards and welcoming dormer windows had been erected; and at two minutes past five the entire town was as flat as Babylon. (148)

[53] Light, pp. 2, 12, 38 and 62.
[54] "Sinclair Lewis," p. 90.

They do not share her enthusiasm and often change her ideas to better suit themselves, for instance overruling her suggestions for a play and settling for something entertaining and moral.

Vida Sherwin provides a contrast to Carol. Her perspective seems in many ways like a more healthy and constructive one. She wants to reform the town as well, but she is more realistic about how to accomplish change and her goals are different. To her, a new school building is more important than a beautiful town hall; she also understands that it takes time to win support for your ideas and to influence the ruling powers into appropriating money for such a project. She tells Carol that the difference between the two of them is their approach:

> Vida was, and always would be, a reformer, a liberal. She believed that details could excitingly be altered, but that things-in-general were comely and kind and immutable. Carol was, without understanding or accepting it, a revolutionist, a radical, and therefore possessed of "constructive ideas," which only the destroyer can have, since the reformer believes that all the essential constructing has already been done. (274)

Vida, who is always straightforward and frank with Carol, also tells her, "If you must know, you're not a sound reformer at all. You're an impossibilist. And you give up too easily." Carol expects too much too soon: "You want perfection all at once" (290). True, but then who can blame Carol? Yes, when she has to face the reluctance and resistance of the villagers, she gives in – for the time being. But only until she finds a new project to pursue. She keeps bouncing back, whether out of spite or out of the naïve belief that all is not lost, not yet. In the words of Martin Light, "she is like Don Quixote with bandaged head taking to the road once more."[55]

Carol wants to change her environment; she needs to change it so that it can better fit her ideas of village charm and beauty.[56] Reality has failed to live up to her expectations; everything is different from what she had imagined or, rather, from what she had *fancied*. Light says of Lewis's characters that "they fancy the long-ago, the far-away, and the

[55] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 64.
[56] *Ibid*, p. 33.

exotic,"[57] in other words, they are always longing for "elsewhere."[58] They experience their environment as stifling and uninspiring, and hold on to the belief that things would be better somewhere else. Even so, Carol faces the new circumstances of her life as best she can; she tries to persuade herself to give Gopher Prairie a chance, not least out of fondness for Will.

It might be that Carol is a rebellious soul, but nevertheless she tries to fit in; she wants to be accepted and feel that she is part of the community. "Reform the town? All she wanted was to be tolerated!" she reflects (116). To her best ability, she tries to live up to the expectations of others and to fill the different roles that are her lot. She tries to be a wife, housewife, mother, friend, and a member of the Thanatopsis and the Jolly Seventeen. On more than one occasion she has to restrain herself, holding back her true feelings, in order to avoid conflict. Discussing the duties of a librarian with Ethel Villets, "Carol saw that the others were listening, waiting for her to be objectionable. She flinched before their dislike." On her way home, she agonizes: "It was my fault. I was touchy. And I opposed them so much. Only – I can't! I can't be one of them if I must damn all the maids toiling in filthy kitchens, all the ragged hungry children. And these women are to be my arbiters, the rest of my life!" (109). It is a learning process, of course. She is much more outspoken and prepared to shock – she even *wants* to shock the villagers – to begin with, but in time she learns that nothing is achieved by aggravating her opponents. It is better to appeal to their egos, commend them on their efforts, and flatter them, hoping to somehow win them over.

In the novel, Will is another contrast to Carol. H. L. Mencken stresses the difference between men and women, or what he calls "the disparate cultural development of male and female," which has led to a mutual lack of understanding between the sexes and has left women with "disquieting discontents."[59] Will is the character that most forcefully gives a voice to the opposite view of Carol's, that is, that life in Gopher Prairie is not that bad after

[57] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 6.
[58] See Schorer, *An American Life*, p. 293.
[59] "Consolation," in *A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 18.

all. His take on life is fundamentally different from Carol's. Perhaps the best example of this is the evening when they hear the train passing: "to Carol it was magic" while Kennicott's "version of that fire and wonder" is much more sober: "No. 19. Must be 'bout ten minutes late" (255). Whereas she romanticizes and is lost in reveries, he is a down-to-earth, hands-on, hardworking pragmatist. In his line of work, there is no room for romanticism; he has to face the realities of life, in more than one sense. He gets to witness both life and death. He also recognizes that it is necessary to be realistic about the things you want to accomplish in life, that you have to plan ahead and save your pennies for a rainy day. Husband and wife, the two of them fail to truly understand each other. As much as Carol fails to appreciate Will, he is equally puzzled by her and does not understand her reasons, her longing, her disappointment.

Throughout, Carol has conflicting feelings toward Will. At times she feels affectionate, fond of him, even in love with him. Then there are times when she is annoyed with him, with his provincialism, his lack of sophistication. She is torn between, on the one hand, admiration and respect for his capability as a doctor and, on the other, the realization that for all his good qualities, Will is no Prince Charming. Sometimes Carol believes that she made a big mistake in marrying Will, that she married him for the wrong reasons, that is, in order to escape the dreariness of her work and her life in St. Paul. Then there are moments when she is touched by the thought that he needs her, even depends upon her. It takes time for Carol to finally realize that there is more to Will than meets the eye, that he has his own doubts, worries, secret longings:

> She had fancied that her life might make a story. She knew that there was nothing heroic or obviously dramatic in it, no magic of rare hours, nor valiant challenge, but it seemed to her that she was of some significance because she was commonplaceness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting. It had not occurred to her that there was also a story of Will Kennicott, into which she entered only so much as he entered into hers; that he had bewilderments and concealments as intricate as her own, and soft treacherous desires for sympathy. (460)

Even if they are very different, they do belong together.

Carol's affair with Erik Valborg is an expression of her rising discontent; it is the outward manifestation of her inner rebellion. Calling it an "affair" is perhaps blowing the whole thing out of proportions, since nothing truly outrageous ever takes place between them. The villagers may gossip, but Carol is sexually innocent. The relationship never amounts to anything beyond secret meetings, holding hands, and her sense of guilt. Her rebellion has nothing to do with sexual freedom.[60] In fact, as observed by James Hutchisson, Carol "reflects the middle-class attitudes of Lewis's contemporary audience" and "only thinks she is a radical."[61] Spending a year in Chicago after college, she does not fit in with the bohemians: "It cannot be reported that Carol had anything significant to say to the Bohemians. She was awkward with them, and felt ignorant, and she was shocked by the free manners which she had for years desired" (26). Her demand is not for a lifestyle completely free from convention. One of the things which really seem to bother Carol is the way the men treat their women, excluding them from conversation and decision-making, not taking them seriously. A perfect example is her demand for a regular allowance; she feels humiliated every time she has to ask Will for money. She wants to be his partner, his equal. More than once Carol tries to engage in conversation with the men, discussing politics and other unladylike subjects, but she rarely gets anywhere. They obviously do not feel comfortable talking to a woman about their business. In need of someone to talk to, she turns first to Guy Pollock and then to Erik Valborg.

Erik is a projection screen for all of Carol's romantic dreams. She invests him with qualities he does not possess. To her, he is a poet, an artist. Seeing him for the first time, she is immediately fascinated by him: "A visitor from Minneapolis, here for business? No. He wasn't a business man. He was a poet. Keats was in his face, and Shelley, and Arthur Upson, whom she had once seen in Minneapolis" (351). She is drawn to him because he appears so

[60] See Dooley, p. 78.
[61] *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 27.

different from the other men in town, so sensitive, so cultured. What perhaps attracts her more than anything is their shared romanticism. In Erik, Carol finds another hopeless dreamer like herself.[62] He completely lacks Will's realism and is prone to declare foolish things like not caring if he has to live in poverty as long as he gets to spend his life with Carol. But Erik enters the stage too late. Carol has become too settled, too commonsensical, to convince herself that there is a future for her and Erik. At times she is able to see him for what he really is, a coarse and common farm boy. His poem for her only proves that he is all talk, that he is not a potential artist but a boy who passionately wants to be one: "And she was grateful – while she impersonally noted how bad a verse it was" (411). Will finally makes Carol see that Erik has no merits as an artist:

> Wait now! What has he actually done in the art line? Has he done one first-class picture or – sketch, d'you call it? Or one poem, or played the piano, or anything except gas about what he's going to do? …can't you see that it's just by contrast with folks like Doc McGanum or Lym Cass that this fellow seems artistic? (417)

Unwilling to give up her comfortable life, but also out of loyalty towards her husband, Carol decides that she has to terminate the "affair."

Hutchisson seems to believe that Carol finds a certain measure of fulfillment and happiness in motherhood.[63] Hugh is a distraction. He takes her mind off of everything else, but only for a short while: "For two years Carol was a part of the town; as much one of Our Young Mothers as Mrs. McGanum. Her opinionation seemed dead; she had no apparent desire for escape; her brooding centered on Hugh" (261). Things like child-rearing and managing a household, the things that someone like Will expects to satisfy her, are not enough; these preoccupations cannot subdue her discontent. She loves Hugh dearly and takes pleasure in her walks with him, feeling rejuvenated by his questions. All the same, she has longings that the poor child cannot fulfill:

[62] See Light, pp. 67-68.
[63] *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, pp. 35-36.

> I don't care! I won't endure it! They lie so – Vida and Will and Aunt Bessie – they tell me I ought to be satisfied with Hugh and a good home and planting seven nasturtiums in a station garden! I am I! When I die the world will be annihilated, as far as I am concerned. I am I! I am not content to leave the sea and the ivory towers to others. I want them for me! Damn Vida! Damn all of them! Do they think they can make me believe that a display of potatoes at Howland and Gould's is enough beauty and strangeness? (292-293)

It does not seem like she returns to Gopher Prairie out of consideration for Hugh, as Hutchisson claims, but rather because it is time at last. Not underestimating her love for her son or making her out to be a bad mother, Carol is driven by her own needs, first and foremost. The boy needs his father and the village is a good place for him to grow up in, but Carol cannot return to Gopher Prairie until she feels ready.

The Washington experience seems decisive in enabling Carol to settle down in Gopher Prairie once and for all; she needs her adventure, a last fling. City life is not quite what she expected, but she finds it satisfactory all the same. The office routine and the cliques and scandals in the office cannot undermine her sense of being connected with the big world through her work. Most importantly, she feels independent. Here she answers to no one. Here she does not have to watch her every step. Washington also provides her with an environment which stimulates her imagination:

> It was mystery which Carol had most lacked in Gopher Prairie, where every house was open to view, where every person was but too easy to meet, where there were no secret gates opening upon moors over which one might walk by moss-deadened paths to strange high adventures in an ancient garden. (446)

In the city, it is possible to have privacy. It is possible to dream and build castles in the sky. It is possible to make new and exciting acquaintances. Even though the apartment she lives in is "not at all the 'artist's studio' of which, because of its persistence in fiction, she had dreamed," the company she keeps is to her liking; unlike the villagers, "they played, very simply, and they saw no reason why anything which exists cannot also be acknowledged" (448). Men and women socialize on very different terms from what they do in Gopher Prairie, that is, more naturally, less stiffly. With all these new impressions pressing in on her, Main Street is reduced "from bloated importance to its actual pettiness" (451).

Martin Light questions the extent of Carol's growth and development. In his opinion, she seems to be pretty much the same person towards the end of the novel, despite her own belief that she is changing.[64] According to him, she is never able to gain any real insight about herself, and her attitudes are persistent. James Hutchisson disagrees with this evaluation. To him "Carol also matures in the novel: at the end, she begins to direct her scattershot idealism at things she is actually capable of accomplishing and accepts the reality of her life in Gopher Prairie."[65] I find that Carol does have moments of rare discernment, in which she recognizes her own folly. For instance, she is able to see that her relationship with Erik is "[a] pitiful and tawdry love-affair" with "[n]o splendor, no defiance"; that she is "[a] self-deceived little woman whispering in corners with a pretentious little man" (382). Visiting Minneapolis with Will, she feels provincial and rustic, not a woman of the big city after all. Living in Gopher Prairie has changed her. Towards the end of the novel, she reflects that she is just as ridiculous as Mrs. Swiftwaite, that she is not as cultured and aloof as she wants to believe: "I have become a small-town woman. Absolute. Typical. Modest and moral and safe. Protected from life. *Genteel!* The Village Virus – the village virtuousness" (374). She has grown older, if not necessarily much wiser, and that eventually makes her feel wearied with city life and homesick for Gopher Prairie. The pace of the city and the life led by the young city dwellers have lost their appeal and Carol finds herself longing for a quiet, easier life. She is *not* the same Carol we meet at the beginning of the novel. Life has challenged her expectations; it has brought her to her knees. She realizes that, in spite of herself, she has let herself become a part of Gopher Prairie. The life she once dreamed of is no longer an option. She belongs by Will's side, and it is time for her to make the best of her situation.

Even though Carol's attitude towards Gopher Prairie and its people does not change fundamentally – she will not, as she proclaims, withdraw all her criticisms – she is prepared to

[64] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, pp. 68-69.
[65] *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 27.

compromise. Lewis apparently wanted Carol to acquire only a limited growth, that is, in the end her insights do not amount to much because she is unable to do anything about them.[66] Something has definitely happened to her perspective, as symbolized by the photos that Will brings with him to Washington to persuade her to come back.[67] When Will tried to lure her to come to Gopher Prairie in their courtship days, the photos were indistinct and blurry and Carol did not know what to make of them, but now she recognizes all the familiar places; for the first time she is able to see the town clearly.

If Carol never truly learns how to appreciate the villagers and village life, of which Will often accuses her, she nevertheless finds a way to cope with her existence in Gopher Prairie. By the end of the novel, she decides to make her peace with the town: "I'm going to love the fine Will Kennicott quality that there is in Gopher Prairie. The nobility of good sense" (424-425). She is finally ready to go back and settle down, but to her this is not the ultimate defeat because she, in her own mind, has never lost her faith:

> Though she should return, she said, she would not be utterly defeated. She was glad of her rebellion. The prairie was no longer empty land in the sun-glare; it was the living tawny beast which she had fought and made beautiful by fighting; and in the village streets were shadows of her desires and the sound of her marching and the seeds of mystery and greatness.

It appears that "[h]er active hatred of Gopher Prairie had run out" (463). She has failed to realize her ambitions for Gopher Prairie and its inhabitants, but she resolves that she will continue to raise questions. There is nothing else left for her to do. Her hope rests with her unborn daughter; perhaps the next generation of Carols will be able to bring about change? There is a limited victory in her defeat, a faint optimism. Like Lewis, Carol is not prepared to deny the Middle West a splendid future.[68]

In the end, Carol reaches a conclusion which for some critics seems to cancel out everything that has gone before in that it relieves the townspeople of all responsibility:

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[66] "Introduction to *Main Street*," p. 204.
[67] See Lundquist, pp. 69-70.
[68] See Dooley, p. 70, Schorer, *An American Life*, p. 295, and Schorer, "Sinclair Lewis and the Method of Half-Truths," in *A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 52.

> And why, she began to ask, did she rage at individuals? Not individuals but institutions are the enemies, and they most afflict the disciples who the most generously serve them. They insinuate their tyranny under a hundred guises and pompous names, such as Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race; and the only defense against them, Carol beheld, is unembittered laughter. (451)

Dooley concludes, "With a wave of his hand, [Lewis] gives the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie a general pardon."[69] As he sees it, blaming institutions and the herd mentality, Lewis allows the individual members of the community to get away with all the mean things they say and do. I have to disagree with Dooley on this point. It rather seems to me that this is Carol's attempt at coming to terms with the unjustified cruelty she has witnessed. The only explanation she can find is that, by pledging their allegiance to certain institutions, these individuals fail to see that there is something wrong with their conduct as long as it serves their purpose, which is to preserve the institution, whether that be the Church, the Family, the Country, etc. This does not necessarily acquit them; Lewis has let the villagers expose themselves and their hypocrisies throughout the novel. He has charged them with and found them guilty of the crime of cultivating an environment which kills the spirit of individuality. Now he grants Carol the maturity to forgive them. If she is going to be able to live "happily ever after," she cannot hold a personal grudge against each and every one of her neighbors.

Finally, the question remains: what does the ending of the novel suggest? The last word is Will's. Carol refuses to admit her defeat, and then he tries to reassure her: "Sure. You bet you have…" like a man who has not really paid attention to her or who is trying to quiet down a defiant child. His final concern is expressed this way: "Say, did you notice whether the girl put that screwdriver back?" (471). Thus the final words of the novel trivialize Carol's fight and reinforce the contrast between her and her husband and their different worldviews: the two of them remain the romanticist and the pragmatist, the idealist and the realist. They have approached each other in an attempt at a deeper and shared understanding, but here it seems as if nothing has changed.

[69] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 66.

Returning to Martin Light and his analysis of Carol as a quixotic character, it seems reasonable to conclude that *Main Street* is in fact a novel about "correct viewing." Carol is constantly struggling to see Gopher Prairie, to see it for what it is and not as she wants to see it. Unlike Light, however, I am prepared to grant Carol her limited growth. Her approach toward village life has really changed. Even though she stubbornly refuses to admit her defeat, at last she is able to see the village clearly. Even more important for her development, she finally sees herself clearly as well. She acknowledges her own middle-agedness, her own pretentiousness, her own haughtiness. Her reluctance to give up her hopes for the future is not a denial of the realities of life but an attempt at survival. Without her dreams, Carol simply cannot exist.

CHAPTER TWO

Babbitt: Middle America

In *Babbitt*, Lewis left the American small town and moved on to investigate life in the medium-sized cities that were appearing fast across America. The world of *Babbitt* is the world of the middle class, of fairly prosperous citizens aspiring to climb even higher on the social ladder. These city dwellers have confined themselves to a shallow existence. They have replaced the values of their forefathers with false values; they are much too concerned with appearances to worry about the meaning of life, or to consider the value of their endeavors in the bigger scheme of things. Setting out to dissect life in the suburbs and expose the hypocrisies that exist there, Lewis's verdict is much the same as the one he passed on small-town life: these people lead narrow and unfulfilled lives, but if he can only manage to make his readers recognize the futility of such lives, he can also make them realize that it is not necessary for them to continue down the same path towards discontent and maladjustment.

The first hundred pages or so of the novel give a detailed account of one single day in the life of George F. Babbitt. We follow him as he goes through the routines of an ordinary workday. One of the most striking features of Babbitt's world is the gadgets and devices with which he surrounds himself. Elizabeth Stevenson says of the 1920s that "it was the fountainhead of our present infatuation with clever little aids and accompaniments to life."[70] Babbitt is like a kid in a toy store. He is fascinated with every new gadget on the market, but his interest can only be sustained for a limited time, until something even better comes along. He takes great pride in his new possessions, and is sure to display them and brag about them to his playmates. He is deceived by the notion that these possessions somehow reflect upon him as a person and puts him in a better light; he figures that his yard "was perfection and

[70] *Babbitts and Bohemians*, p. 3.

made him also perfect."[71] The accumulation of things has a value in itself, even when the thing in question is in fact redundant, basically of no use to its owner. It is important to show all your friends and acquaintances that you are keeping up with the latest developments, that you are truly a modern man, and, most importantly, that you have the money to spend. Prosperity must be displayed for the benefit of everyone else and in order to prevent them from excluding you from their circle. Babbitt is thus driven by the urge to buy things he does not need, like the cigar-lighter, "a priceless time-saver." Once he has bought it, "he remembered that he had given up smoking." Never mind, the cigar-lighter is still "the last touch of refinement and class" (51) to his car. Catching up with his lunch friends at the Athletic Club, he rushes to secure their approval and admiration for his latest purchase. Babbitt's reverence for technical devices is matched by a lack of understanding of their inner workings: "He had enormous and poetic admiration, though very little understanding, of all mechanical devices. They were his symbols of truth and beauty" (65). They are shrouded in mystery, and that seems to be part of their appeal. Not once does he try to gain any insight into how things work.

Babbitt's house is a good illustration of Stevenson's observations on the advertising business in the 1920s.[72] Advertising forced its products on the public, thus leaving no room for individual differences and contributing to the standardization of American society. Alluring its victims into believing that these products would somehow improve their lives, the advertising business was closely allied with the corporations manufacturing goods that nobody really needed. Babbitt's house is as standardized as his mind; it looks like it has been taken straight out of a catalogue and there are few signs of people living in it. It does not reflect Babbitt's taste in furniture or express his individuality in any way: "Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this." He has provided his family with

[71] Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, a Signet Classic (New York: New American Library, 1998), p. 4. Future page references are to this edition, and are included in parentheses in the text.
[72] *Babbitts and Bohemians*, pp. 148-151.

"the latest conveniences," but the result is that "there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: it was not a home" (14). His house is a major improvement in terms of progress; his living room "was a room so superior in comfort to the 'parlor' of Babbitt's boyhood as his motor was superior to his father's buggy." However, the furniture is "like samples in a shop, desolate, unwanted, lifeless things of commerce" (88). The books have never been read by anyone save his youngest daughter, Tinka; likewise, the piano is not exactly worn out from frequent use. Times have changed, and Babbitt has moved up and onward from his humble background, but at what cost? His house has no soul, no personality, it offers no comfort. In everything he does, Babbitt is told what to think.

A city of the size of Zenith is still a village in spirit, as Lewis himself was sure to point out in his unpublished introduction to *Babbitt*.[73] It is indeed curious how Babbitt cares just as much as your average villager about the impression he makes on his neighbors. For instance, he reflects "that it was agreeable to have it known throughout the neighborhood that he was so prosperous that his son never worked around the house" (70) – even when it annoys him that his son, Ted, is so lazy. It is all about keeping up appearances; Babbitt is just as absurdly self-conscious as Carol Kennicott. The freedom to think and do as one pleases is no more within Babbitt's reach than it ever was to Carol. He constantly seeks the approval of his peers, and is afraid to give vent to any opinion which might not agree with them. In fact, he seems incapable of independent thought altogether; we learn that in his pockets he keeps "clippings of verses by T. Cholmondeley Frink and of the newspaper editorials from which [he] got his opinions and his poly-syllables" (9). Babbitt's opinions are not his at all, but a collection of opinions borrowed from others. He blindly subscribes to the standards of his group. As we see later in the novel, the only way to keep your position in the community is by never opposing the majority.

[73] "Unpublished Introduction to *Babbitt*," in *The Man from Main Street*, p. 26.

The middle class of Zenith is just as prejudiced and suspicious of new ideas as the villagers of Gopher Prairie. Their standards and rules are the only ones that are acceptable. According to Stevenson, "[a] strain of hysteria continued after the war; there was a hunting down of radicals and aliens; a hating of the new and startling; a hugging of the false, a preventing of healthful innovation and spontaneity."[74] Nothing could be truer of the members of the Boosters' Club or any of the other clubs Babbitt belongs to; they are suspicious, if not downright afraid, of the so-called radicals, like Seneca Doane, "the radical lawyer." They perceive any socialist idea as a threat to their own position in the community. Like the well-to-do villagers of Gopher Prairie, they are eagerly protecting their own interests and terrified that their "hard-earned" money will fall into the wrong hands.

As in *Main Street*, Lewis employs the satiric monologue in order to expose the hypocrisies of the speaker: "Now I haven't got one particle of race-prejudice. I'm the first to be glad when a nigger succeeds – so long as he stays where he belongs and doesn't try to usurp the rightful authority and business ability of the white man" (139-140). There is a double standard at work here, a sense that one set of rules should apply to the privileged few and another to the ignorant masses. Prohibition, for instance, is an invasion of personal liberty, but "[j]ust the same, you don't want to forget prohibition is a mighty good thing for the working-class. Keeps 'em from wasting their money and lowering their productiveness" (110). The workers and the Afro-Americans need to know their place in society. The middle class has no compassion with the workers who go on strike, no comprehension that their demands for improved working conditions might be just; they fail to see that there is something wrong with the way business is conducted. The working classes, on their side, were subdued by the commonly shared notion that everyone could somehow cut in and get a share.[75]

[74] *Babbitts and Bohemians*, p. 71.
[75] *Ibid*, p. 55.

To the citizens of Zenith, success is measured in material wealth. Like most of their contemporary Americans, they believe that the only thing worth striving for is material prosperity. Thus business becomes the best avenue to follow, both for the individual and for the country, with the businessman as a new national hero. People do not realize how limited a choice they are being offered.[76] In a business culture, possessions are ends in themselves. What people seem to forget is that their intellect and emotions need to be fed as well. But their clubs, their entertainments, even their churches offer no such stimulation. Empty creeds, hollow words – the gospel of boosterism is preached and believed in by everyone in Babbitt's world. They have a creeping feeling that something is missing from their lives, but cover it up with a false optimism; their slogan says that Zenith is the best city to live in and that everything is good. There is no sure faith that will lend Babbitt a sense of comfort. He sees that "[a]ll about him the city was hustling for hustling's sake" (149). The new times have come with a new pace; farm life with its trudging on in the same old rut has been replaced by city life with its racing onwards to conquer the next new thing on the market. These city dwellers do not dare to stop lest they should discover that their lives make no sense, that their hurrying and scurrying is futile.[77] Babbitt is thus the archetypical American of the 1920s.

With prosperity and with regulation of the working man's hours and wages came the new concept of *leisure*. All of a sudden people had time to spend on something besides work, and these hours needed to be filled.[78] Babbitt is no different from his contemporaries in this respect. He devotes a lot of time to being a member of various clubs. Following his group, Babbitt is a joiner. He takes an "interest" in baseball – because it is the proper thing to do:

> He honestly believed that he loved baseball. It is true that he hadn't, in twenty-five years, himself played any baseball except back-lot catch with Ted – very gentle, and strictly limited to ten minutes. But the game was a custom of his clan, and it gave outlet for the homicidal and side-taking instincts which Babbitt called 'patriotism' and 'love of sport.' (148)

[76] See Stevenson, pp. 125-126.
[77] See Franz Alexander, "Frontier Individualism in a Corporate Society," in *The Social and Cultural Life of the 1920s*, p. 82.
[78] See Stevenson, pp. 191-192.

Baseball, like everything else in his life, is a way of indicating that one belongs to the group and observes its customs. Another of Babbitt's pastimes is going to the movies. It is an outlet for him, an escape from the realities of life. It is also in tune with his times, with the world's fascination with a new medium. All in all, Babbitt is not a very cultured man; his favorite literature and art are the comic strips in the *Evening Advocate*. Examining Verona's books, he finds none to his own liking: "In them he felt a spirit of rebellion against niceness and solid-citizenship. These authors – and he supposed they were famous ones, too – did not seem to care about telling a good story which would enable a fellow to forget his troubles" (258). Babbitt wants a quick fix, easy solutions. Surrounded by all kinds of conveniences that make life easier, he is not in the mood for books that will challenge him to think for himself. Rather, he seeks pure entertainment.

The citizens of Zenith are just as narrow-minded and limited in their perception of culture as your average small-towner. To them, culture is no different from the shiny, new cars they drive or from any of the gadgets they have filled their houses with; culture is a commodity that can be bought and sold, and thus reflects their prosperity. According to the poet Chum Frink, "[c]ulture has become as necessary an adornment and advertisement for a city to-day as pavements or bank-clearances." Further, "[t]he thing to do then, as a live bunch of go-getters, is to *capitalize Culture*; to go right out and grab it" (250). A symphony orchestra to promote the city is then suggested. Thus, the up-and-coming middle class has lost sight of the fact that literature, music, and art are supposed to nurture their souls, stimulate both their intellect and emotions. Culture is not "an adornment," but rather a means by which to broaden one's horizon, seek meaning in life, and express oneself.

In the novel, the Good Citizens' League comes to play an important role as the most prominent members of Babbitt's community, led forward by Vergil Gunch, try to exert pressure on poor Babbitt and force him to join the League. Lundquist feels that "[i]n giving

the Good Citizens League such an important role in *Babbitt* Lewis was drawing attention to the fascist tendencies that are constantly on the verge of destroying freedom in the United States."[79] The League is a group of conservative men who have appointed themselves as guardians of the *status quo*; they wish to preserve the current order of society and to repress all opposition. It does seem fair to claim that the author who later wrote a novel like *It Can't Happen Here* wanted to hammer home the point that freedom cannot be taken for granted and that there are forces at work in American society constantly trying to restrict the personal liberty of the average citizen. D. J. Dooley recognizes what he terms "Lewis's extraordinary distrust of organizations."[80] Lewis, so it seems, did not believe that it would be productive for people to join forces and form organizations, working towards a common goal. Rather, he suspected that no matter what the purpose of any given organization, it would try to make others conform to its standards of conduct, using any means necessary in order to bend the willpower of those who refuse to comply. This is certainly true of the Good Citizens' League; not only do they want to control the behavior of their members and make them act according to their standards of propriety and respectability, but they also intend to reach outside their group and keep, for instance, the lower classes in check. Vergil Gunch makes it clear to Babbitt that "you got a position in the community, and the community expects you to live up to it" (329).

May Sinclair contributes an interesting point of view when she asserts that in *Babbitt*, the minor characters are lifelike and true to reality.[81] The impression one is left with after reading various critics, is that Lewis did not receive a lot of praise for his realistic characters. On the contrary, his characters are perceived as types; they do not strike the reader as real. James M. Hutchisson is one of the many critics who jump to the conclusion that Lewis's

[79] *Sinclair Lewis*, p. 43.
[80] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 247.
[81] "The Man from Main Street," in *The Merrill Studies in Babbitt*, compiled by Martin Light (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Publishing Company, 1971), p. 19.

characters are types.[82] This view implies that there is a lack of depth to his characters. As I have argued in the chapter on *Main Street*, the minor characters are often exaggerated and even grotesque. It is true that Lewis emphasized external features, that is, their mannerisms and speech, their general conduct. In that respect, these characters might appear to be empty shells with no substance. However, they have too much personality to be labeled "types." Yes, they are important not as individual characters but as representatives of their class, but they also have different roles to fulfill, for instance, as group leader or as the intellectual member of the group. Even though they share the same opinions and convictions, Lewis cherishes the little details that make it possible to associate a face with each name. This does not mean that I find these characters "real"; to me, they are caricatures and as such they are delightful and thematically significant. Like all good satirists, Lewis distorts and exaggerates in order to get his message across to his readers, in his condemnation of the kind of herd mentality, standardization and conformity that prevail among the American middle class. His portrayal of these people is not realistic in the traditional sense. Satire dominates a novel such as *Babbitt* because satire as a genre better serves the author's purpose, that is, the exposure of the unsatisfactory condition of society.

According to Philip Allan Friedman, "Lewis approves of material standardization but abhors the fact that with all their material success too many Americans in their complacent arrogance are unaware that they concentrate on being like one another."[83] In *Babbitt*, Seneca Doane opposes the standardization of mind, but he maintains that "[s]tandardization is excellent, *per se*. When I buy an Ingersoll watch or a Ford, I get a better tool for less money, and I know precisely what I'm getting, and that leaves me more time and energy to be individual in." He concludes that "what I fight in Zenith is standardization of thought, and, of course, the traditions of competition" (97). Mass production, made possible with the assembly

[82] *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 61.
[83] "*Babbitt*: Satiric Realism in Form and Content," in *The Merrill Studies in Babbitt*, p. 72.

line, is in itself a great advancement because it enables all kinds of people to buy things they could otherwise not afford. The problem arises when people are no longer able to think for themselves, when all their important choices have been made for them. The real danger of material standardization is perhaps not that every house in America looks more or less the same, both on the inside and the outside, but that this kind of standardization leaves absolutely no room for individualism. Friedman concludes that "in a too-standardized industrial society, being an individual, not merely individualistic, is a luxury which only a man blessed with a permanently high income can afford."[84] Someone like Babbitt, who depends upon the goodwill of his peers, cannot jeopardize his already fragile position. His circumstances prevent him from breaking out; with a family to support, there is too much at risk for him to dare to stand alone outside the group of respectable citizens with whom he associates. They provide him with a framework for his life, a sense of security and stability. His social position is a particularly precarious one.[85] He aspires to become part of the social elite but fails to measure up and is thus torn between hero-like worship and badly disguised envy when relating to the McKelveys of the world. At the same time, he is always just one step ahead of losing everything he has built up in terms of material prosperity; it thus becomes vital to maintain his relations and his position in the community. Babbitt stubbornly claims to his father-in-law, "This is a free country. A man can do anything he wants to." His father-in-law straightens him out: "One little rumor about you being a crank would do more to ruin this business than all the plots and stuff that these fool storywriters could think up in a month of Sundays" (354). In other words, if you want to keep your head above water, you have to stay on good terms with the right people.

The people of Zenith are "essentially alone and afraid."[86] According to Whipple, they are not in touch with their inner selves; because they have no inner compass, their only

[84] "*Babbitt*: Satiric Realism in Form and Content," p. 73.
[85] *Ibid*, pp. 65-66.
[86] Dooley, p. 237.

guideposts are the standards of the group. They cling to each other because there is nothing else for them to do. A general lack of personal, deeply felt values seems to be the problem. Striving towards material wealth and social position, both men and women have narrowed down the scope of their horizon to an unsatisfactory view. Their interests, not to say their experiences, are thus limited.[87] The Babbitts are no different; the highlight of the year is their dinner with the McKelveys, much anticipated but, unfortunately, a total disaster. Babbitt is quite successful for a while as a public orator, but "[f]ame did not bring the social advancement the Babbitts deserved" (182). He is always worried about his standing in the community; his perception of himself does not quite match reality. When stopping for gas, "Babbitt felt himself a person of importance, one whose name even busy garagemen remembered" (27). Babbitt would like to be someone important, but despite the fact that he has a function within his community, he has no real power, no influence.

Lewis's main complaint in *Babbitt* is the smoothing away of all differences in American society; not only people but cities too are becoming more and more standardized. This observation was made in *Main Street* and is repeated here. Much like Carol's discovery that all American small towns resemble Gopher Prairie, Lewis maintains that "[a] stranger suddenly dropped into the business-center of Zenith could not have told whether he was in a city of Oregon or Georgia, Ohio or Maine, Oklahoma or Manitoba" (49). In an environment like this, Babbitt cannot help but feel that something is missing in his life:

> Mechanical business – a brisk selling of badly built houses. Mechanical religion – a dry, hard church, shut off from the real life of the streets, inhumanly respectable as a top-hat. Mechanical golf and dinner-parties and bridge and conversation. Save with Paul Riesling, mechanical friendship – back-slapping and jocular, never daring to essay the test of quietness. (224)

Like Carol, Babbitt reaches a point where he can no longer repress his feelings of dissatisfaction. He differs from her, however, in the fact that Carol is an outsider to Gopher Prairie whereas Babbitt is very much a part of Zenith. His rebellion thus seems different since

[87] "Sinclair Lewis," pp. 74-75.

he is acting up against the conventions he has lived by and believed in most of his life while she has rejected those conventions all along. The outcome is much the same, however. Both of them are defeated by their environment and forced to adjust. There are two questions which need to be addressed here. First, is it plausible that a man of Babbitt's caliber would attempt a rebellion or even feel the way he does in the first place? Second, does Babbitt change and mature or does he remain the same Babbitt throughout the novel? Our encounter with Babbitt, as was the case with Carol, leaves us uncertain whether or not he has actually learnt anything from his recent experiences.

According to H. L. Mencken, "[t]here is no plot whatever, and very little of the hocus-pocus commonly called development of character. Babbitt simply grows two years older as the tale unfolds; otherwise he doesn't change at all – any more than you or I have changed since 1920."[88] In my opinion, this is not entirely true. Babbitt's change is perhaps most evident in his relationship with his son, Ted. Early on in the novel, Babbitt acts the responsible parent and insists that the boy needs a college education. Ted has ideas of his own, but these are not considered valid options by Babbitt, who himself is a college graduate – something he takes pride in, even though he admits that many of the subjects he studied have no real value to him in his chosen profession. College, like many other things in Babbitt's life, was never a choice but simply the proper and commonsensical thing to do. In those last pages of the novel, with the unexpected elopement and marriage between Ted and Eunice Littlefield, Babbitt's attitude toward his son has changed. He no longer expects him to do what is expected, but rather encourages him to follow his heart. Babbitt admits that "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life! I don't know's I've accomplished anything except just get along." He is not disappointed that Ted sneaked off to get married: "But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do

[88] "Portrait of an American Citizen," in *A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 20.

and did it." Anxious that his son should not waste his life the way he has, Babbitt offers his support: "I'll back you. Take your factory job, if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours!" (378). Realizing that it is too late for him to change his life, Babbitt, like Carol, has high hopes for the next generation. Initially, his children are more of an annoyance than a source of joy to the frustrated Babbitt, but as the novel proceeds he experiences with his son the closest thing to a genuine friendship he will ever know (with Paul Riesling in prison). We learn that Babbitt had ambitions of his own when he was a young man, that he wanted to enter into politics and that he even was considered somewhat of a liberal by his fellow students. What he might have amounted to if he had not married Myra and become a family man, Babbitt (and the reader) will never know, but he has finally come to understand that Ted has to choose his own path.

If nothing about his life as perceived on the surface has changed, then surely Babbitt himself is not blind to that fact:

> He was conscious that his line of progress seemed confused. He wondered what he would do with his future. He was still young; was he through with all adventuring? He felt that he had been trapped into the very net from which he had with such fury escaped and, supremest jest of all, been made to rejoice in the trapping. (375)

Lacking a real alternative, Babbitt seems only too happy to scurry back to his wife's side and to the security and stability of his old life. Too old for the Bunch, and too scared to stand alone against everyone, Babbitt chooses the only life he has ever known. But in so doing, he seems fully aware of the implication, that is, that he did not achieve anything by his rebellion. Of course it is possible to dismiss Babbitt's rebellion as a midlife crisis; he most definitely fits the profile, a man in his late 40s having an affair, joyriding at night, boozing, and otherwise acting irresponsibly. Even so, his dissatisfaction seems justified and his attempt at breaking free seems sincere on his part. When all of a sudden he decides to defend Seneca Doane or the workers on strike, Babbitt believes that he is doing the right thing. In the end, though, he has

to face his own weakness. He does not have what it takes to be a crusader: "He could not stand the strain. Before long he admitted that he would like to flee back to the security of conformity, provided there was a decent and creditable way to return. But, stubbornly, he would not be forced back; he would not, he swore, 'eat dirt'" (357). Prepared to return to the herd, he still has to feel that it happens on his own terms: "Then did Babbitt, almost tearful with joy at being coaxed instead of bullied, at being able to desert without injuring his opinion of himself, cease utterly to be a domestic revolutionist. He patted Gunch's shoulder, and next day he became a member of the Good Citizens' League" (368). He has, in his own view, preserved his dignity. This time, he has made a conscious choice to go back to the way things were.

Martin Light's analysis of Babbitt as a character emphasizes his quixotic nature.[89] Babbitt is, in Light's opinion, capable of both romance and fancy. His fantasy of the fairy girl reveals an inclination toward daydreaming and romanticizing. If he does not read a lot of novels, his mind is nevertheless "shaped by poetry, by editorials, and by films."[90] That is, the way Babbitt perceives reality is strongly influenced by fiction of one kind or another. His romantic tendencies are given direction and purpose through his acquaintance with Seneca Doane, who encourages him to speak up against his usual crowd and in favor of the less fortunate. Light suggests that this is the moment when "[h]is quixotism stirs." In this phase, Babbitt defends the weak and defies the leaders of his group; "he will right wrongs."[91] For a while, his imagination enables him to see Tanis Judique and the Bunch as delightful and interesting people.[92] As he escapes the dreariness of everyday life, they offer him adventure. However, they fail to live up to his expectations, particularly Tanis, who turns out to be just another needy, middle-aged woman. "He had pictured Tanis as living in a rose-tinted vacuum,

[89] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, pp. 73-84.
[90] *Ibid*, p. 73.
[91] *Ibid*, p. 83.
[92] *Ibid*, p. 75.

waiting for him, free of all the complications of a Floral Heights" (318). Finally able to see her for what she really is, a woman desperately trying to appear young by surrounding herself with youngsters, Babbitt breaks off the affair. Less obviously fitting the pattern of a quixote than Carol, Babbitt's return to his group makes more sense if we consider the possibility that he, like Carol, suffers the tragedy of facing up to a reality that does not match his expectations. Disappointment thus leads him to recognize and accept the realities of his life. However, not prepared to completely surrender every hope that happiness is still possible, he passes the torch to his son, Ted. His unfulfilled dreams might still come alive through him.

Drawing on Light's theory, I feel inclined to agree that the way Babbitt responds to his environment is not at all unlikely. His feelings seem to be a rather healthy response to the conditions he has to put up with. In *Main Street*, Lewis made an effort to make us aware of the effect Carol's early romanticizing has on her adult life. In *Babbitt*, the protagonist has to be reminded of the ideas he entertained when he was a young man; he has to be made aware, through his rejuvenating acquaintance with Seneca Doane, of the kind of man he once aspired to become. He does not understand why he feels the way he does until Doane makes him realize that the life he has settled for is not the life he once wanted for himself. It seems to me that the real Babbitt has been hibernating while his life has been running its own course on autopilot. He needs someone to stir him from his sleep. So well has he been molded into perfect conformity that he has lost sight of all the options a young man has to face and choose between. We learn that Babbitt, because of his relationship with Myra, never could choose freely, but had to do what a man has got to do, that is, provide for his family. His dissatisfaction with trivialities such as wet towels in the bathroom seems to be the outward expression of an unexpressed sense of lost opportunity. He could not seek self-fulfillment; he could not realize his dream. At the age of 46, he has reached a dead end. I imagine that in the hustle and bustle of settling down, raising a family, building a home, and securing his position

in the family business, Babbitt never had time to ask himself, "What is it all about?" Now, as his children are leaving the nest, as he has grown estranged from his wife, as business offers no real challenges, and he is set in his routine, Babbitt finally has the leisure to ask himself all those questions we hardly ever dare to ask from fear that there is no answer. I think he suffers a minor existential crisis, in which he is stricken by the futility of his endeavors and the meaninglessness of his life.[93] The trouble is, of course, that he does not know what to do about all this. Unfortunately, there are no ready-made answers; he has to figure it out on his own. As he stumbles onwards – even if this remains implicit in the turn of events and the outcome of the novel rather than becoming explicit through anything Babbitt says or does – it seems to me that in the end he realizes and accepts the fact that he *has* chosen the life he leads. No one forced him to give up his dream. Meaning is not thrust upon us by some external force. Meaning is something each of us has to seek in our own lives. Thus, Babbitt discovers that the only way of life that makes lasting sense to him is the one he has so ardently subscribed to all his adult life.

Light draws attention to the following speech made by Babbitt:

> …here I've pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven't any vices 'specially, except smoking – and I'm practically cutting that out, by the way. And I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep in trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet, even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied! (57-58)

He then claims that "Lewis gives us the babbitt-vision of the American Dream. Babbitt has lived according to its inspiration, but it is a dream which leaves the dreamer restless and betrayed."[94] It seems to me that, like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, Babbitt has gotten his ideals confused. He is living the 20th-century version of the American Dream, but that version is a distorted version of the original dream. The pioneers came to America looking for freedom

[93] For a more in-depth analysis of Babbitt's existential crisis, see Åshild Tangen, *The Quest for Self in Sinclair Lewis'* Babbitt, a thesis presented to the Department of British and American Studies (Oslo: University of Oslo, 1998), esp. pp. 18-52.
[94] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 81.

from authorities and the opportunity to make a good life for themselves. Many of them had experienced religious persecution in their native countries. Now the American continent lay before their feet with a promise of freedom, the freedom to choose your own life and to give that life a purpose. Striving to achieve material wealth, Babbitt has neglected his forefathers' ideal of personal liberty. Money is only the means to an end. Prosperity enables a man to do the things he wants to do, regardless of other people and their opinions. In his own life, Lewis seems to have desired nothing more than he desired complete freedom; the freedom to go wherever he wanted and to do whatever he wanted – regardless of the consequences and at any cost.[95] But Babbitt has not bought himself freedom; rather, he has enslaved himself to material possessions. He is caught in a vicious circle: the more he earns, the more he spends, but the things he buys cannot satisfy his longings.

"Wish I'd been a pioneer, same as my grand-dad – but then, wouldn't have a house like this. I – Oh, gosh, *I don't know!*" Babbitt frets (85). Being a creature of habit, a babbitt cannot go back to the pioneer way of life, as Babbitt's excursions into the wild surely demonstrate. Returning to Maine on his own, hoping to re-experience some of the good times he shared with Paul, he soon discovers that he is not equipped for a life in the wilderness. His guide, Joe Paradise, also fails to live up to Babbitt's expectations. Lewis affords Babbitt a moment of insight:

> Thus it came to him merely to run away was folly because he could never run away from himself.
>
> That moment he started for Zenith. In this journey there was no appearance of flight, but he was fleeing, and four days afterward he was on the Zenith train. He knew that he was slinking back not because it was what he longed to do but because it was all he could do. He scanned again his discovery that he could never run away from Zenith and family and office, because in his own brain he bore the office and the family and every street and disquiet and illusion of Zenith. (286)

Truly a product of his environment, Babbitt realizes the inevitable truth: there is no escape. "Vast is the power of cities to reclaim the wanderer," Lewis reflects and then concludes that "ten days after his return he could not believe that he had ever been away. Nor was it all

[95] See Dooley, p. 239.

evident to his acquaintances that there was a new George F. Babbitt…" (292). The trouble seems to be that even though Babbitt is painfully aware of what he does not want, he has no alternative ideas of what he really wants. Too single-minded to imagine another way of life, Babbitt has committed himself to plodding along down the same road he has been on for the past twenty odd years. Given that he could walk away from his life, he would not know with what to replace it:

> It was coming to him that perhaps all life as he knew it and vigorously practiced it was futile; that heaven as portrayed by the Reverend Dr. John Jennison Drew was neither probable nor very interesting; that he hadn't much pleasure out of making money; that it was of doubtful worth to rear children merely that they might rear children who would rear children. What was it all about? What did he want? (260)

Babbitt suffers a crisis of faith, but society does not provide a satisfactory answer to his questions. Conformity and standardization have deprived him of his options. In the words of D. J. Dooley, he has, like his fellow Americans, been "deceived by false values"; he has "chosen the artificial over the real, the insubstantial over the solid." In brief, in *Babbitt* "Lewis chronicles the triumph of mediocrity."[96] Without proper role models and values, Babbitt is groping in the dark.

May Sinclair suggests that "Babbitt's conflict is not with the community, but with his ego and with his wife and children, so far as they are hindrances to the cheerful, important expansion of his ego."[97] I find that, like Carol, Babbitt is struggling with himself just as much as he is fighting his environment. However, the cause of his dissatisfaction is not his family *per se*, but the limited choices his position in the community offers him. The mild and gentle Myra is not necessarily an obstacle, but his sense of duty and responsibility most definitely is: "His predominant fear – not from any especial fondness for her but from the habit of propriety – was that his wife would learn of the affair" (314). In his depiction of Babbitt's marriage,

[96] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 246.
[97] "The Man from Main Street," p. 16.

Lewis reveals his power of observation, combined with savage satire, when describing Babbitt's deliberate and detestable treatment of his wife:

> With true masculine wiles he not only convinced himself that she had injured him but, by the loudness of his voice and the brutality of his attack, he convinced her also, and presently he had her apologizing for his having spent the evening with Tanis. He went up to bed well pleased, not only the master but the martyr of the household. For a distasteful moment after he had laid [*sic*] down he wondered if he had been altogether just.

Like a defiant child, Babbitt decides, "I'm going to run my own life!" (349). Myra cannot keep him from debauchery, but his suspicion that his fellow members at the Boosters' Club disapprove of his behavior can. His personal needs must be left frustrated, not out of a concern for his family, but out of his concern for his reputation.

D. J. Dooley is not convinced by the turn of events after Babbitt launches his rebellion. He finds the characters "simple and unreal" and thinks that "the plot is full of improbabilities." Lewis, he feels, does not manage to successfully dramatize Babbitt's battle against society and convention. Further, the Good Citizens' League is not as frightening as Lewis probably wanted them to appear, and much of the effect he wanted to achieve is thus lost. However, Dooley is prepared to admit that the members of the League are uncanny in their mechanical manner and false heartiness as they expose Babbitt to their brand of psychological torture. And, as a matter of fact, Babbitt's fear is real.[98] The way I see it, it makes no difference whether or not Gunch and his men are really as frightening as Babbitt perceives them. They pose a threat to his safe existence; they have the power to end his life as he knows it by excluding him from their circle. Keeping in mind what is at stake here, namely the only life Babbitt knows or even really desires, the Good Citizens' League cannot be dismissed as a bunch of grumpy middle-aged men who enjoy feeling important by exerting unjust pressure. Babbitt fears the consequences of his actions; he fears what these men are capable of doing. Inadvertently, Babbitt threatens the balance of society and this is why, in the

[98] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 88.

words of Sheldon Norman Grebstein, he must be "driven back to the herd."[99] Grebstein emphasizes the power of society to repress all opposition in order to preserve the status quo. As long as no one questions the system and everyone accepts their place in society, the machine runs smoothly. When Babbitt starts grumbling in public about such topics as the strikers and the immigrants, and shows the audacity of suggesting that these people are not that different from the elitist middle class after all, such opinions cannot be tolerated.

Comparing *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, James M. Hutchisson asserts that Babbitt "seems to have more self-knowledge than Carol Kennicott,"[100] but, nevertheless, in their shared pursuit of a more fulfilling existence, "where Carol at least partly succeeds, Babbitt mostly fails."[101] First, Babbitt's self-knowledge seems just as fragile as Carol's. Second, Carol's limited victory should not be exaggerated. Both Babbitt and Carol end up more or less where they started, little lost and little gained. On the surface, life continues as before they veered from their destined path. However, both of them feel that they have not succumbed completely to the demands of society, but that they have returned of their own free will, thus preserving their self-esteem. Although Carol's defiance is better expressed, there is the same defiance in Babbitt's supportive words to Ted.

"Defiance" seems a key word when analyzing the character of Babbitt, but most of the time it seems like an adolescent kind of defiance. There is something of the child who does not like to be told what to do in the Babbitt who "suspiciously watched the men at the Athletic Club that noon. It seemed to him that they were uneasy. They had been talking about him then? He was angry. He became belligerent. He not only defended Seneca Doane but even made fun of the Y.M.C.A." (325). Openly defying authorities, boldly proclaiming, "Now, you look here, Charley, I'm damned if I'm going to be bullied into joining anything, not even by you pluses!" (351), he is nevertheless overcome by fear afterwards, resembling a child

[99] "*Babbitt*: Synonym for a State of Mind," in *The Merrill Studies in Babbitt*, p. 40.
[100] *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 83.
[101] *Ibid*, p. 89.

worrying about the consequences of his actions. In many ways, Babbitt strikes the reader as a teenager who desperately wants his friends to like him and approve of him. At the same time, he wants to define himself as an individual, an entity separate from but also a part of the group. Anthony Channell Hilfer summarizes this idea when he says, "The businessman as baby is the dominant image that runs throughout *Babbitt*. The name itself suggests part of the image: Babbitt = baby, babble." Furthermore, "nowhere in the book does [Babbitt] seem to have wandered very far from the border of puberty. Even his wife is an indulgent mother…" Hilfer finds that "[e]ven the fantasies expressive of Babbitt's 'buried life' are adolescent." The fairy child certainly is reminiscent of the teenage boy's secret yearning for companionship with the unattainable female. Keeping in mind Babbitt's morning ritual, the greetings he is met with at the Athletic Club, and so forth, it seems fair to claim that "Babbitt's world, like that of any small boy, is ruled by rituals of speech and behavior. The more commonplace the action, the more of a ritual it becomes."[102] It makes sense that the Babbitt who experiences an existential crisis is portrayed as a boyish man. A more mature character would have been surer of himself and more able to assert himself, whereas a man who still seems to be quite an adolescent at heart is more prone to question the meaning of life and struggle with feelings like fear, alienation, and loneliness. This is not to say that an existential crisis is necessarily a privilege of youth, but it is still during our teens that most of us struggle to form an identity and therefore might find it hard to accept the terms of life that we have been offered. Later in life, when we are more settled, we do not feel as inclined to ask, "What is the meaning of life?"

Several critics have complained about the episodic nature of Lewis's novels and feel that this is a weakness on the author's part. According to Mark Schorer, in *Babbitt* "there is no genuine plot or coherent, causative march of dramatic events from beginning to end that

[102] "Lost in a World of Machines," in *The Merrill Studies in Babbitt*, p. 85.

would necessarily have determined their order."[103] That is, Lewis could easily have jumbled the different episodes, without making any visible effect on the overall impression of the novel. As observed by Schorer, what binds these episodes together is the fact that Babbitt is somehow involved in them. However, in my opinion, this is not necessarily a flaw. Life is a string of episodes, one episode more or less randomly followed by the next, thus constituting our lifespan. By themselves, the different events and situations Babbitt experiences are not of much significance, but as part of the whole they shed light on Babbitt and his life. It seems that Lewis wanted to show Babbitt in all the different aspects of his existence, ranging from family life to business to friendship to social and public life, religion, hobbies, and so on. Babbitt's conduct, the way he deals with and feels about all these, reveals his character. Daily events, Babbitt's routine and habits, securely place Babbitt in his position as a member of and spokesman for the middle class. The larger events, those that are out of the ordinary, serve the purpose of allowing Babbitt to move forward.

By implication, Grebstein seems to suggest that Babbitt has indeed matured through the course of the novel when he observes that "Babbitt is not of heroic dimensions – nor could he ever be so in the conditions of his world; but he is an adult or promises to become one at the novel's end. He walks out to face the world and live in it, although it is no longer Eden."[104] After having had a taste of the sweet life and not really finding it to his liking, Babbitt is now ready to come home, just like Carol realizing by the end of *Main Street* that the only place that makes sense to her is Gopher Prairie where she has built up a life for herself. Whereas Carol had her adventure in Washington, Babbitt never left Zenith, but he did embark on an adventure of his own. Even though they both seem to make a circular journey, somehow arriving at their respective starting points, they still have gained some valuable insight along

[103] "Sinclair Lewis: *Babbitt*," in *The Merrill Studies in Babbitt*, p. 112.
[104] "*Babbitt*: Synonym for a State of Mind," p. 42.

the way, enabling them to cope with an existence which used to depress them but now seems possible to endure.

Perhaps one should not overemphasize the fact that both Babbitt and Carol choose to return of their own free will, but it seems crucial that they believe that they do. Whether they are persuaded by circumstances or actually make what seems to be the most reasonable choice, that decision shows some maturity on their part. With spouses and children who need them, they cannot just walk away from all obligations and responsibilities. However disappointing life has been, at some point they chose that life, Carol by marrying Will and Babbitt by marrying Myra. There is something almost juvenile about the way they indulge their own needs and disregard the feelings of the people who are closest to them, but eventually they both do the responsible and adult thing. Depending on how the reader chooses to interpret the events leading up to the novel's conclusion, Myra's illness either provides Babbitt with a convenient excuse to hurry back to a life of security or else it is the sign he has been waiting for, convincing him that his place in life is by his wife's side. He immediately falls back into his part as the husband who does not quite know how to handle a crisis and thus depends upon his wife to remain calm. Motherly by nature, a true nurturer, Myra needs Babbitt to need her. Their relationship has not suffered from his adultery.

Philip Allan Friedman is not quite as optimistic concerning the ending of *Babbitt*. He calls it "an ultra return to babbittry." That is, the ending cancels the validity of Babbitt's rebellion. Lewis has manipulated his reader, making him identify with Babbitt. Thus blinded by sympathy, the reader imagines that the Babbitt who emerges in those final pages of the novel is a new Babbitt. This is not the case, according to Friedman. In his opinion, "Lewis thus achieves the ultimate in satire – to let Babbitt see himself clearly for a while, then permit him to live with that bitter view…"[105] It *is* easy to like Babbitt, to identify with him.

[105] "*Babbitt*: Satiric Realism in Form and Content," p. 74.

Nevertheless, giving him the benefit of the doubt, it seems unfair to claim that Babbitt does not change at all. The Babbitt who offers his son his blessings has rediscovered an important part of himself, so that even though life goes on as before, he is a happier and more content man.

Walter Lippmann regrets that Lewis does not "put the rebellion of Carol and the yearning of Babbitt in the perspective of an understanding of how, as Spinoza says, all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." He appreciates the fact that Carol and Babbitt, unlike Arrowsmith, who embraces the religion of science, have no religion ready at hand, but he still feels that Lewis could have provided a spiritual backdrop so that "at least the author would have understood the failure of his characters to understand themselves."[106] As I have argued, it seems that Lewis wanted both his characters to gain limited insight into their own situations. Thus, as he tries to show his reader, they do not fail to understand themselves completely, but are allowed a glimpse which subsequently enables them to readjust to those situations. Deprived of true faith, Babbitt all the same grapples with existential questions like "What is life really all about?" Not an ardent devotee such as Arrowsmith, whose answer is the persistent search for truth, Babbitt is still able to perceive the futility of his life. It is true that Carol and Babbitt are, as Lippmann calls them, "worldlings," but when he says that the worldling "must either conquer the world and remake it, though in that he will almost surely fail, or he must escape into his dreams,"[107] it seems that he denies them the option they eventually vote for: to make peace with the world.

James Lundquist feels that "[i]n *Main Street* Lewis gave us the thoughts of Carol Kennicott in a straightforward way; in *Babbitt* the nonverbal, deeply felt but ill-defined level of the hero's consciousness is much more a crucial part of the novel's structure."[108] If by this he means that Babbitt is less able to verbalize his thoughts and feelings, this seems to be the

[106] "Sinclair Lewis," p. 89.
[107] *Ibid*, p. 90.
[108] *Sinclair Lewis*, p. 71.

case. Carol follows a clear line of thought, apparently able at times to discern the cause of her dissatisfaction, whereas Babbitt experiences much of the same discontent without being able to pinpoint the cause. While she channels her energy into various efforts at changing her environment, he is left feeling restless. His work offers no stimulation, and his pastimes merely serve the purpose of passing the time. According to Lundquist, Lewis here seems to alternate between description of "outer appearances" and "internal reality,"[109] perhaps in a different way than in *Main Street*. Carol often expresses her thoughts to other people while Babbitt struggles alone – especially after the loss of Paul. Despite these differences, it is tempting to say that even though Lewis wished to delve more thoroughly into Babbitt's consciousness and make him a more multidimensional character than Carol, Babbitt is not a superior creation. To some extent the male version of Carol, Babbitt's development follows more or less the same curve: rising discontent resulting in a rebellion which ends in defeat; limited insight that is hard to come by and easily lost; a confused progress leaving the reader with a notion that the main character has not successfully parted with all preconceptions but might slip back into a former of mind; and, finally, showing resignation on their own behalf but expressing high hopes for their children.

The satire, however, is more crystallized in *Babbitt* than in *Main Street*. It is the satire that makes us question Babbitt's development and Lewis's intentions. In the novel, Lewis seems to both ridicule Babbitt and sympathize with him. His complaints and self-pity make us smile. But perhaps Lewis's portrayal is more effective that way. Babbitt's flaws make him more human, even partly likable. If we accept that Babbitt in himself is not the main target of the criticism which is inherent in Lewis's satire, it appears to me that what the author achieved by making him out to be a bit ridiculous in his blind adherence to the new faith of the commercialized and standardized American society, was to establish how powerful are the

[109] *Sinclair Lewis*, p. 71.

forces of conformity. The exterior of Babbitt's life, that is, his house, his public life, the opinions and attitudes he advocates, and so forth, proves the fact that in America the average white, middle-class man sooner or later succumbs. There is no room for him to cultivate his own interests and passions, no room to explore his possibilities and choose freely who and what he wants to be. Babbitt's inner life seems irreconcilable with his surface life, simply because living in America has created these tensions in him. His doubts about the life he has been leading so far are nurtured by his environment.

Hutchisson draws our attention to "a persisting criticism of the novel: that *Babbitt* is a combination of two types of literary exposition."[110] That is, there appears to be two Babbitts, a parody Babbitt and a believable human one, and some critics feel that Lewis did not manage to successfully join the two in one character. The problem seems to be that Lewis was trying to do two quite different things at the same time; on the one hand, he was giving "an anthropological analysis of the Midwestern city," and, on the other, he was presenting his readers with "a study of an American type such as Babbitt."[111] This is where *Babbitt* perhaps differs the most from *Main Street*. In *Main Street* Lewis satirizes the villagers and small-town life through Carol's perceptions, whereas in *Babbitt* the protagonist is himself the object of the author's satire.[112] Carol's harsh judgment of Gopher Prairie probably more or less reflects Lewis's own. An outsider to the village, Carol distances herself from her fellow villagers. Babbitt is part of Zenith and cannot observe it from the outside as she does. Rather, Lewis observes Babbitt in his environment, making him step forward in all his ignorance and foolishness. Even so, there is more to Babbitt than meets the eye. Lewis wants us to believe that the Babbitt who is a conformist to the fingertips is not at all content with his life. It is as if he cannot make up his mind whether to condemn or save Babbitt, if salvation is possible. This ambiguity seems to stem from the author's own inability to distance himself completely from

[110] *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 49.
[111] *Ibid*, p. 57.
[112] *Ibid*, p. 89.

his middle-class, Midwestern background. The attitudes he wanted to criticize were also partly his own attitudes, instilled in him from early childhood. At once satirizing Babbitt and, at the same time, sympathizing with him, and allowing his readers to sympathize too, Lewis reveals both his contempt for middle-class attitudes and his belief in basic human decency.[113]

Babbitt is not a bad man; he is a misguided man. Awakened by Doane, he realizes that he has lost himself. He used to be a young man with a potential to do great things, a man who was not afraid to give voice to so-called liberal opinions. Later he got trapped by the course of events and soon found himself irrevocably molded into conformity. But there is a core of the idealistic Babbitt that remains and is aroused from its sleep. I find that it is that core that prevents Babbitt from backsliding into a parody of a man by the end of the novel. However, although Babbitt might have changed, his environment has not, and the burgeoning idealist has not yet gained the strength to successfully oppose his peers. Continuing along this line of thought, Hilfer says that "Lewis exaggerates the strength of the obstacles and the weakness of the rebels… The truth is that Lewis simply cannot imagine freedom within the social structure of America."[114] This seems to imply that Babbitt lacks the strength of character which would allow him to stand up for his beliefs and make a final break with his community. As I will move on to explore in *Arrowsmith*, it is possible to pursue one's ideals, but only if one is prepared to live in complete isolation, to live outside society rather than within it. In Lewis's world compromises are hard to find; either you give in to the forces of conformity or you withdraw from a society that will not tolerate deviancy.

[113] See Frederick J. Hoffman, "Critique of the Middle Class: Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*," in *The Merrill Studies in Babbitt*, p. 49.
[114] "Lost in a World of Machines," p. 90.

CHAPTER THREE

Arrowsmith: The Idealist

In *Arrowsmith*, Lewis takes his reader on a journey through the medical profession as well as on a journey through America, revisiting the locations he had portrayed in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, that is, the small town and the middle-sized town, and eventually leading his protagonist to the big city. The attitudes he exposed in those earlier novels still persist. This time, however, Lewis shows us what effect the stifling American environment has on the creative spirit.[115] By letting Martin Arrowsmith stumble his way through medical school and through various occupations, Lewis clearly wants us to see that there is no space in which this aspiring talent can unfold and develop his skills. Everywhere he turns, Martin has to face the obstacles placed before him by society. Lewis has turned his critical eye on a very specific group of people, determined to expose the hypocrisy that prevails in the world of medicine. It seems worse, somehow, than the hypocrisy of your average Main Street or Boosters' Club, simply because it involves not only individual human beings but the future of the entire human race. Scientists and doctors should somehow rise above the rest of us, be more honest and dedicated, because the choices they make have such far-reaching consequences.

At the University of Winnemac, Martin soon realizes that most of his fellow students, along with many of the professors, are more interested in personal success than in scientific research which might lead to advancements within the field of medicine. They want money, fame, and prestige. Medicine, or so it seems, is not about healing people. Lewis is swift to pass judgment on institutions and compares the University of Winnemac with "a Ford Motor Factory," turning out "beautifully standardized" products, that is, students.[116] The students are not encouraged to think for themselves, but are trained to be professional salesmen, whose

[115] See T. K. Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis: *Arrowsmith*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert J. Griffin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 34-35.

[116] Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith*, a Signet Classic (New York: New American Library, 1998), pp. 6-7. Future page references are to this edition, and are included in parentheses in the text.

most important skill will be the ability to talk any patient – or perhaps one should say customer – into paying for services that he or she does not necessarily need. Dr. Roscoe Geake, professor of otolaryngology, gives the following speech, which seems to sum up the philosophy of the university:

> Knowledge is the greatest thing in the medical world but it's no good whatever unless you can sell it, and to do this you must first impress your personality on the people who have the dollars. Whether a patient is a new or an old friend, you must always use *salesmanship* on him. Explain to him, also to his stricken and anxious family, the hard work and thought you are giving to his case, and so make him feel that the good you have done him, or intend to do him, is even greater than the fee you plan to charge. Then, when he gets your bill, he will not misunderstand or kick. (83)

Martin complains about his fellow students and their attitude toward medicine. They are "learning a trade" and the doctor's trade will "enable him to cash in" (24). In his opinion, they are plain "commercialists" (29). Professor Max Gottlieb represents the opposite view of medicine and science, the view Martin chooses to adopt. There is a potential conflict of interest here. Is science a means toward an end (that is, the purpose of science is to cure sickness) or is science an end in itself (validated by the nobility of the search for truth)? Martin's ideals clash with the demands of society; his idealism is at odds with the pragmatism of his fellow medicine men. In his final address to the entire medical school, Dr. Geake tells them what sadly seems to be the truth, that "the world judges a man by the amount of good hard cash he can lay away" (84). Martin faces a world that does not appreciate a man's work unless its value can be measured in profit or be determined by the results it brings about.

In the words of D. J. Dooley, in *Arrowsmith* Lewis describes "the obstacles in the scientist's way." In Wheatsylvania, "the doctor is a medicine man and conformity to the tribal code is much more important than medical skill," while in Nautilus Martin faces the boosterism of Pickerbaugh. Another obstacle is the profit motive, and finally, most painfully experienced by Martin in St. Hubert, humanity stands in the way of his research. The novel deals with "a dramatic tension between two kinds of value."[117] That is, just as much as Martin

[117] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, pp. 109-110.

has to fight his colleagues and their attitudes, he also has to fight himself. As a practicing doctor, he wants to cure illness and alleviate pain. As a scientist, he wants to be thorough in his research. He knows that short-term solutions do not pay off in the long run. The scientist has to be patient. If he can succeed in annihilating all sickness for future generations, it cannot matter to him that people have to die in the meantime. Decisions made today might have dire consequences for tomorrow. At the same time, there is nobility in the country physician's daily work. His father being a doctor, Lewis apparently had great respect for men of action. Martin shares some of Lewis's notions. Initially, he feels enthusiastic "about the freedom of the West, about the kind hearts and friendly hands of the pioneers, about the heroism and usefulness of country doctors" (114). A country doctor has great impact on other people's lives; he enjoys tremendous respect and admiration. Martin, however, fails to live up to that role and soon has to face a lot of opposition. He cannot help but feel "homesick for the laboratory, for the thrill of uncharted discoveries." In the end, he has to choose between his search for "fundamental laws" and "temporary healing" (118).

Charles E. Rosenberg contends that Lewis's hero could not be a physician; he had to be a scientist. Martin is only heroic to whatever degree he manages "to disengage himself from the confining pressures of American society."[118] As Martin himself experiences in Wheatsylvania, the main function of the physician is his ability to heal and console. The physician has an obligation toward his patients which outweighs every other concern. The scientist is more detached. In his laboratory he does not have to face the ugliness of illness and is thus able to focus on the beauty of his search for truth. Dealing with life and death, the physician seeks remedies that will give immediate results. The realities of life cannot penetrate the walls that confine the scientist. He has the luxury of indulging his own curiosity. He distances himself from both his fellow human beings and his own humanity; he might

[118] "Martin Arrowsmith: The Scientist as Hero," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith, p. 54.

seem cold in his handling of questions that deal with human lives, but he can allow himself to care less about individual destinies than about theories and experiments. Martin the scientist as opposed to Martin the physician has a great advantage because he can defend his actions in the name of science. However, for the sake of argument, I find that some of Martin's truly heroic moments take place outside of the laboratory, when he engages with society more directly through his work and thus challenges the attitudes he encounters in his fellow Americans. In those cases when he opposes popular opinion and follows his own instincts, taking precautions, for instance placing people in quarantines and submitting them to tests, those seem to be the occasions when he might actually make a difference. Those are the occasions when he shows his true colors, letting people know that he will not be bullied. But every time Martin faces the kind of opposition that threatens to destroy him, Lewis provides him with an escape, with the opportunity to start over somewhere new. That, in my opinion, undermines his heroism. Martin the scientist seeks refuge in his laboratory, where it is so much easier for him to ignore the demands of society. Martin the doctor has to stand up for himself and defend his course of action to a hostile public.

Lewis provides various contrasts to Martin in the novel: Angus Duer represents the profit motive, Pickerbaugh is a booster, and Holabird is "the intellectual fraud," that is, the administrator who puts on the pretense of being sincerely interested in science when everything indicates that he has forgotten his old vocation and that his only concern at this point in his career is to secure his own future as well as that of the institute. Madeline Fox and Joyce Lanyon "symbolize the demands of Society and Success," whereas Leora "represents personal integrity."[119] The seemingly different characters Duer, Pickerbaugh, and Holabird have one thing in common: their take on things is the exact opposite of Martin's and they represent the worst kind of enemy, the enemy disguised as a friend. They all try to help

[119] See Sheldon N. Grebstein, "The Best of the Great Decade," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith, p. 70.

Martin come to his senses, trying to persuade him that he needs to abandon his ideals. Men like these have turned the practice of medicine into a commercialized enterprise. Their motivation is profit and personal gain. The idea that a new drug has to undergo thorough experimentation, that all questions must be answered satisfactorily, and that all possible effects and side-effects must be taken into consideration before a pharmaceutical company can launch the drug on the market, is an offensive idea. Time is money. Unnecessary surgery and treatment, information and statistics that have no real value beyond intimidating an ignorant public into taking precautions – the list goes on, but the point is that these modern medicine men, these miracle workers, have the power to exploit people. They benefit while the crowd suffers. In the words of Sheldon N. Grebstein, it is "the exploitation of the many for the profit of the few."[120] This is perhaps best illustrated in Gottlieb's employment by the pharmaceutical company Dawson T. Hunziker & Co. His employers are only interested in profit and do not care whether a drug has the proclaimed effect or not. The questionable ethics of large pharmaceutical companies are under the microscope here, and Lewis exposes them as hypocrites and frauds.

When urging Martin to publish his results prematurely, Dr. Tubbs explains to him the value of doing what will bring about "the greatest good for the greatest number" (324). He employs the philosophy of utilitarianism to justify his own urgency, covering up his concern that someone might beat them to the finish line if they hesitate for too long. Martin has to defend his caution and thoroughness against the accusation that he is somehow cheating the world by withholding an important discovery which might save lives. Humanity stands in the way of the scientist. Dr. Tubbs's main concern is really the "competition" they are up against. If someone else happens to stumble across the same discovery and manages to publish his results before Martin finishes his report, his work will have been in vain and the institute, not

[120] "The Best of the Great Decade," p. 71.

to say Dr. Tubbs, will have been deprived of the fame and glory that would follow in the wake of a revolutionary discovery. Medicine is business, and the competition is just as fierce as in any other line of business. To stay in the public's eye – preferably getting positive exposure, but "all publicity is good publicity" – is vital to a company's success. These concerns make it difficult for someone like Martin to stand by his ideals.

Both in his professional career and in his personal life Martin has to face conflicting interests. His fiancée, Madeline, and his second wife, Joyce, both try to change him. They are dazzled by money and fame; they want Martin to be successful. But their idea of success is different from his. To Martin success involves progress in the laboratory, finding answers that in turn raise new questions. Madeline and Joyce are more in tune with their times. As I have mentioned in my analysis of both *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, during the 1920s there persisted a belief that material prosperity was the noblest of ends and that material success was somehow within the reach of everyone. Joyce seems to think that she can fix everything with money, first building Martin a laboratory in their home, hoping that this way she will actually get to spend more time with him, and later suggesting that she could build a nice little cottage right across the lake from Martin's and Terry's abode, thus bringing herself and their son, John, close to Martin. She does not understand that there are certain things money just cannot buy, like a person's loyalty, love and affection.

Leora is a different kettle of fish altogether. She is careless about her appearance, but her winning personality still makes her everyone's favorite pet. Even though she rejoices at the prospect of Martin finally earning a decent living, she nevertheless cares less about material wealth than about Martin's happiness. She is the one who has to remind Martin *who* he is: "You belong in a laboratory, finding out things not advertising them." She cannot help but query, "Are you going on for the rest of your life, stumbling into respectability and having to be dug out again?" (217). At various times in his career, Martin makes an honest attempt at

doing what is expected of him, trying his best to fulfill his designated role, whether as a country physician, as an employee of the Public Health department, or working at a private clinic. The small town has its standards and conventions that he needs to adhere to in order to fit in and be accepted by his fellow villagers. Pickerbaugh expects him to be enthusiastic about enlightening the public, and at the Rouncefield Clinic, "that most competent, most clean and brisk and visionless medical factory" (270), he is expected to ask no questions and turn out patients as if working on an assembly line. Leora tells Martin, "You're not a booster. You're a lie-hunter." She compares him to Professor Gottlieb and Voltaire: "But maybe they were like you: always trying to get away from the tiresome truth, always hoping to settle down and be rich, always selling their souls to the devil and then going and doublecrossing the poor devil" (218). It is tiresome to always fight, especially when your enemy is society at large and you are a minority insisting on your right to not be submerged into the crowd. Besides, Martin is only human and sometimes finds it hard to resist temptation: "But Watters and Pickerbaugh were not so great a compulsion to respectability as the charms of finding himself listened to in Nautilus as he never had been in Wheatsylvania, and of finding himself admired by Orchid" (213). As long as he plays by the rules, he gets to enjoy such perks as respect and admiration. But as soon as he fails to live with his conflicted self and regains his senses, insisting on doing things his own way, he is met with hostility and opposition.

Leora has received praise as a character from various critics. Henry Seidel Canby feels that Leora rises above the satire of the novel and proves Lewis's ability to create characters. He even uses the term "pure fiction" to establish her superiority.[121] T. K. Whipple says of Leora that "she is indubitably real."[122] I take this to mean that both Canby and Whipple are convinced by Lewis's portrayal of Leora, that to them she is believable and that she seems to come alive on the page. To me, Leora seems more like a man's fantasy girl. It is not likely

[121] "Fighting Success," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith, p. 111.
[122] "Sinclair Lewis: *Arrowsmith*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith, p. 36.

that any woman would put up with the kind of neglect and inconsideration she suffers. She is a perfect playmate for Martin. She does not object to his conduct, but supports him, apparently never expecting anything in return. All the hours she has to spend alone or sometimes just waiting around for him to finish whatever it is he is working on do not set her off complaining. And Martin depends on her. When he has doubts, she reassures him. It seems that Lewis's experience with women such as his wife, Grace, had led him to resent women. Like Babbitt, who escapes the routine and dreariness of married life only in his dreams of the fairy girl, Lewis had to invent his dream girl and she took the shape of Leora. Lewis undoubtedly knew how lonely creative work can be. It seems he wanted Martin to have a companion.

Martin is not completely immune to the allure of success and prosperity. Socializing with the "Smart Set" of Nautilus, "he did admire the Group's motor cars, shower baths, Fifth Avenue frocks, tweed plus-fours, and houses" (244). He feels self-conscious on Leora's behalf, observing that her clothing is not quite up to scratch in comparison with Mrs. Tredgold and the other smart-dressing and elegant wives. He does not want to be "just a climber," but at the same time he does not "see why we should be inferior to this bunch" (246-247). Although he otherwise seems to care very little for material possessions, he is only human after all. When Martin has joined the McGurk Institute, Lewis writes that Dr. Tubbs "led him to a mountain top and showed him all the kingdoms of the world" (321). This is reminiscent of the Bible. In Matthew 4:8-10 Jesus, who has been brought out into the desert to be tested by the Devil, is also led to a mountain top where the Devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, tempting him to abandon his faith by promising him the world if he will only get down on his knees and worship him. Jesus resists, of course, and renounces the Devil, thus proving his faith and dedication. This is not to say that Martin is some kind of Messiah or Savior, but he too is tempted to surrender his faith at the prospect of material gain: "Martin

wavered back to his room, dazzled by the view of a department of his own, assistants, a cheering world – and ten thousand a year." However, the next moment he realizes the price he would have to pay:

> But his work seemed to have been taken from him, his own self had been taken from him; he was no longer to be Martin, and Gottlieb's disciple, but a Man of Measured Merriment, Dr. Arrowsmith, Head of the Department of Microbic Pathology, who would wear severe collars and make addresses and never curse. (322)

Martin perceives "the horror of the shrieking bawdy thing called Success, with its demand that he give up quiet work and parade forth" (323). He is not prepared to corrupt himself and his ideals; he has too much personal integrity to turn his back completely on everything he stands for.

The pioneer spirit, as represented by Martin's grandmother, pervades the novel. She, like her grandson, was prepared to reject immediate and practical solutions in favor of what she could only glimpse on the distant horizon. This is how the first settlers pushed the frontier further and further west. This is how Martin seeks to explore what Grebstein has called "the frontiers of knowledge."[123] The opening of the novel thus implies that Martin belongs to the American tradition of pioneering and places him within a larger context. He seeks to push himself to extreme limits, wanting to go where no man has ever gone before, hoping to map out unexplored territory. The pioneers opened up a whole new world geographically speaking; Martin wants to open up a new world in terms of human knowledge.

Lucy L. Hazard perceives Martin as a "Refugee from Civilization," a frontier character.[124] The first settlers left European civilization behind, hoping to build a new civilization on the unspoilt American soil. Some of them had found the conditions back home impossible to endure, for political or religious reasons. Here, they had a great opportunity to start over, quite literally. Martin, too, leaves civilization in order to make a life according to his own fancy out in the wilderness. He has been bullied around, never able to practice his

[123] "The Best of the Great Decade," p. 69.
[124] See "The Frontier in *Arrowsmith*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith, pp. 113-114.

"religion." He has had it with the different authorities in his life trying to tell him how to go about his work. The freedom he seeks is the same kind of freedom the pioneers desired, that is, the freedom to choose how to live your life. Since the very beginning, America has been "the land of opportunity" to thousands of immigrants. But American society as portrayed by Lewis no longer offers freedom from restraints. The American people might have overthrown the British monarch in those early days of the founding of the country, but they have replaced him with an equally demanding ruler, Standardization and Conformity. Martin, as a true pioneer, has no choice but to turn his back on civilization and set out to explore uncharted territory.

Lewis's critics often emphasize his weaknesses, as when Dooley concludes, "In spite of the excellence of much of the satire and the author's success in fusing satire and novel, the book shows that Lewis could not do what Sherman asked him to do – give a satisfactory exposition of values."[125] I take this to mean that, in his view, Lewis did not successfully illustrate the values that drive Martin on in his quest, that he somehow failed to give his protagonist convincing motives. It might also imply that the so-called "false" values of his opponents are not satisfactorily exposed and accounted for either. Grebstein concludes that two things make *Arrowsmith* different from both *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. First, Martin does not make a compromise in the end. Second, in *Arrowsmith* there is no doubt about where the author's sympathy lies. Despite their weaknesses and flaws, Martin and Gottlieb have Lewis's approval.[126] I have to agree that it seems like Lewis takes Martin's side against society. Even though he makes his share of mistakes, even though he is not perfect, he is not a comic character like Babbitt and he is not a foolish character like Carol. His cause seems to raise him above the average dissenter. He does not only object to the way business is conducted; he has an alternative and that alternative is presented as noble. Whereas Lewis sometimes

[125] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 117.
[126] "The Best of the Great Decade," p. 76.

ridiculed Carol for her self-importance and her "high-brow" ideas about culture, he never questions the value of Martin's ideals. It seems that in Lewis's own mind those ideals need no justification. According to Dooley, Lewis does not defend Martin's position intellectually as much as he gives it prestige. He achieves this by "caricaturing alternatives," by "associating with it moral and intellectual attitudes which the reader is likely to favor (honesty, open-mindedness, a disposition to question received opinions, and so on)," and by "attaching religious overtones to it."[127] This is to say that, rather than making an effort to argue in favor of Martin's position and convince the reader that he is right, Lewis makes his position out to be the best by demonstrating that every other way is inferior.

Mark Schorer has observed that Martin, unlike earlier Lewis characters, is a hero.[128] In my opinion, this is only partially true. He is a hero in the sense that he has a more clearly defined cause. He knows what he believes in and has something to fight for, something that is larger than himself and lies beyond the sphere of strictly personal needs. Both Carol and Babbitt are struggling to define exactly what it is that they are fighting for. Essentially, what they are striving towards is personal fulfillment and individual freedom. They have longings and dreams that are in conflict with their environment. Their truce with society involves a compromise in which personal needs must be left frustrated. Arrowsmith's conflict seems different because he is fighting in the name of idealism; he is a warrior wielding his sword to defend his religion, the religion of science. It thus seems a less personal battle. He is not just defending his right to make individual choices, he is fighting to justify the scientist's work and methods. Victory for one would be victory for all; success would mean a change of paradigm, a new way to approach science, better working conditions for scientists everywhere. Anyway, however noble his cause is, Martin is a stumbling hero. He wavers, fails, and tries again. His heroism suffers from the fact that he is so human, but then again

[127] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 108.
[128] "On *Arrowsmith*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith, p. 45.

perhaps all heroes have weaknesses and flaws. Sometimes his feelings get the better of him, like in St. Hubert. Lewis writes that this is the "biography of a young man who was in no degree a hero, who regarded himself a seeker after truth yet who stumbled and slid back all his life and bogged himself in every obvious morass" (43).

Martin Light perceives Martin Arrowsmith, like Carol and Babbitt, as a quixote. He is an adventurer, just like his grandmother. Light feels that the opening paragraph of the novel is an attempt to "give the story broad heroic, perhaps mythic, scope."[129] Martin does not seem as devoted to fiction as Carol, but Light suggests that some of the books he reads later on in the story, for instance Conrad, feed his fancy.[130] What seems to be decisive here is the fact that Martin does not seem to mature much in the novel; he remains a young boy for all intents and purposes. The language he uses is revealing as he keeps using expressions such as "golly," and when he tries to express sentiment, he often resorts to what Light calls "slick-magazine language."[131] Like Carol, and to some degree Babbitt, Martin is sometimes inclined to see what he wants to see. Catching his first glimpse of Gottlieb, in the mystifying dark of the university campus after nightfall, Martin exposes himself as romantically inclined: "He had worn the threadbare top-coat of a poor professor, yet Martin remembered him as wrapped in a black velvet cape with a silver star arrogant on his breast" (10). Reality quickly sets him straight: "If in the misty April night Gottlieb had been romantic as a cloaked horseman, he was now testy and middle-aged" (11). Later, practicing medicine in Wheatsylvania, Martin perceives himself with a sense of melodrama when trying to save the Novak kid. In the dead of night, chasing on in his car to secure medicine for the child, he imagines that he is in "a race with Death" (158). On the island of St. Hubert, when Martin is no longer able to ignore the suffering islanders and gives in, against his own better knowledge, distributing the phage

[129] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 87.
[130] *Ibid*, p. 88.
[131] *Ibid*, p. 90.

to everyone who wants it, this is Martin's "quixotic gesture."[132] This is his opportunity to be a hero, to make a difference.

Martin, in a moment of weakness, after the loss of Leora, tries to help everyone as best he can. In the words of Martin Light, "[w]ith his head full of idealism and illusion, the quixote goes forth to set injustices aright, to honor his lady, and to seek fame." That is to say, the quixote feels that he has a mission in life. He challenges the conventions of his society, and thus compels his community to expose their own hypocrisies.[133] Martin Arrowsmith seems to fit this description. Leora is his lady; he battles the conventions of medicine, thus exposing the corruption of his profession; and even though he does not seem all that interested in fame, Martin seeks a different kind of recognition, that of his hero, Gottlieb. Arriving at the McGurk Institute, he expresses a desire to succeed, in the sense that he wishes to break new ground within the field of medicine; he wishes to make a discovery that will be of great significance. Gottlieb is puzzled by this: "Succeed? I have heard that word. It is English? Oh, yes, it is a word that liddle schoolboys use at the University of Winnemac. It means passing examinations. But there are no examinations to pass here…" (277). Like any quixote, Martin's hopes, dreams and expectations are challenged by the realities of life over and over again.

Does Martin change in the course of the novel? I feel tempted to agree with Robert J. Griffin that once his character has been established, Martin does not change significantly, but he nevertheless develops in the sense that he learns as he goes along.[134] From early childhood, spending his days in Doc Vickerson's office, Martin knows that he wants to be a doctor. During his university days, his idealism takes shape under the influence of Max Gottlieb. Later, he has to stand many trials, but he always comes out on the other side with his integrity perfectly intact. However, his progress is not linear and he slips just as often as he moves

[132] Light, p. 96.
[133] *Ibid*, p. 3.
[134] "Introduction," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Arrowsmith, p. 12.

forward. Facing obstacle upon obstacle, he is often tempted to give in. He wants to be liked and that is why, for instance, in Wheatsylvania he tries his best to be a good country doctor, providing the best possible care under the circumstances. But the harsh realities of life always make him long for the laboratory. He is not cut out to make decisions under pressure. He cannot face the accusations, cannot carry the burden of responsibility. In the safety of his laboratory, where each experiment takes place under controlled circumstances and every imaginable variation is taken into account, where no one is dying at his feet and he has all the time in the world to come up with a solution, Martin seems perfectly at home. By the end of the novel he realizes that in order for him to be able to stay true to his ideals, he must free himself from all shackles; that is, he needs to have complete freedom. Responsibilities such as having a wife and a child or his duty to his employer, not to say his duty to humanity, can only keep him from doing his real work. To a man like Martin, his loyalty is not to the people who need him, depend and rely upon him, but to the abstract concept of "truth."

T. K. Whipple asserts that "Martin is primarily a type."[135] A type is, as I have mentioned earlier, a flat character, basically defined by one prominent feature that often represents a certain quality or idea, such as Good or Evil. In my opinion, Martin is far too complex to be labeled as simply a type. He has many different qualities, his boyishness being just one of them. Even though he is supposed to represent a certain type of person, the idealist, the literary term *type* is too limited to describe him. His character is rounded, not flat, or else he would not learn from his mistakes, suffer emotional crises, and reflect the way he does on his life. Furthermore, a type is described in terms of external features, clothing, language, mannerisms, and so forth. Lewis wants his reader to get acquainted with the interior landscape of his character, trying to account for Martin's thoughts and feelings and not confining

[135] "Sinclair Lewis: *Arrowsmith*," p. 36.

himself to descriptions of appearances and dialogue. Thus, Martin is clearly not meant to be "primarily a type."

Light makes a point that can hardly be overlooked, that is, the fact that Lewis's male characters "seem to need one extra demonstration of truths they should know but somehow cannot accept."[136] In Martin's case, his marriage to Joyce Lanyon seems unnecessary from a structural point of view as well as from a thematic one. It adds some pages to the novel without adding anything to the story. When Leora dies, Martin is and should have remained free from personal obligations. Her death is a tragedy, but it nevertheless provides him with the perfect excuse to withdraw from society and commit himself completely to his cause. There is no logic in his choice to marry another woman. Not only does his second marriage violate the sacred memory of Leora, but Martin also finds himself entangled a second time, burdened with his duties as a husband. When Joyce turns out to be a demanding wife, quite the opposite of the compliant and understanding Leora, Martin seems more trapped than ever. Is Martin simply a slow learner or did Lewis want him to demonstrate his dedication and integrity by choosing to leave his wife? He could never have left Leora. His consideration for her and the fact that she might desire a better life would forever have chained him down. He needed her companionship to survive the different trials on his journey through the medical profession, but in the long run she is both a blessing and a curse. With Leora dead and buried, there is nothing to keep Martin from doing as he pleases. It may be only natural that a widower should feel lonely for female company, but the real importance of Martin's second marriage seems to be that now, rather than the fickle forces of fate chancing to set him free, Martin chooses his own destiny by severing all ties. His decision to abandon both wife and child demonstrates his dedication once and for all. But it also makes him out to be cold-

[136] *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 93.

hearted. What kind of man leaves his son? His work is more important to him than anything else.

Unlike Carol and Babbitt, who make their peace with society, Martin walks away from the demands of society and continues his work on his own terms. However, his victory seems to have a bittersweet taste. Has he really won or is he a deserter? Would it not have been better for him to have tried to fight the system from within? Dooley claims that despite the conditions of American society as depicted by the author, Lewis still believed that it was possible for his fellow citizens to escape the trap.[137] But the escape that Martin makes is in its own way a compromise. Lewis seems to be saying that you cannot "eat your cake and have it too." If you refuse to conform to the standards of society, you will not be able to survive within that society. Sooner or later you will find yourself succumbing to the forces of standardization and conformity. The only other option is to live outside of society. When Martin chooses a life in the woods with his best friend, Terry, he has to sacrifice every prospect of reconciliation with society. He is no longer a member of that society, and thus he no longer has the power to effect change and reform. Gottlieb's ambition to create a new kind of medical school, completely devoted to scientific research, seems a sounder solution. If it had been possible for Gottlieb to realize his dream, he might have been able to convert future scientists to his own beliefs and, in the long run, might have revolutionized the whole world of medicine by changing the basic attitudes and approach to medicine. It seems to me that Lewis was unable to imagine such a possibility. According to him, the individual has a choice, but it is a choice that involves sacrifice. Martin's victory is perhaps a personal victory, but the implications of that victory for his fellow Americans are dire. America, or so it seems, does not embrace new ideas, creativity, and the willingness to raise questions.

[137] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 137.

According to Dooley, Lewis "has taken the tradition of dissent to its logical and ultimate conclusion."[138] Like the pioneers escaping the confines of their mother country, Martin escapes the confines of society by scrapping the conventions and standards that already exist and starting over, building a "community" from scratch. At the very end of the novel, Terry suggests that they should bring in other young scientists, thus expanding their enterprise. Like the first settlers joining together to build communities, Martin and Terry envisage joining together with other researchers who share their conviction. From the outset of *Arrowsmith*, Lewis has established ties with the tradition of the pioneers. That connection has been reinforced by Martin, describing himself as a pioneer. Here, in his retreat from society, comes the final proof. A true pioneer, Martin is prepared to jeopardize the comforts of a home and the safety of having a secure position in society in favor of the brilliant spectacle of the opportunity to realize his own vision of what life should be like. Mark Schorer does not find this ending believable: "At the end of *Arrowsmith*, in a remote quarter of Vermont, Martin had achieved, most implausibly, ideal circumstances for medical research and natural freedom for himself."[139] I think that, within the context that Lewis has constructed, that is, keeping in mind Martin's ancestry, the ending is not completely unimaginable. Martin has the guts to do what most of us would not dare to do. He is not all that different from an Arctic explorer or an adventurer setting off into the Amazon. The unknown does not scare him. His dedication allows him to find the means to keep on pushing further into the unknown.

Grebstein finds it tempting to speculate about possible parallels between *Arrowsmith* and Lewis's life and career. Like his creator, Martin chooses to abandon his family when they become an obstacle to his work. When writing, Lewis often spent time apart from his wife and son because he felt the need to be free from obligations.[140] Further, Grebstein suggests that Martin's career resembles Lewis's, in that both men wanted to "uproot, change,

[138] *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, p. 113.
[139] *An American Life*, p. 438.
[140] "The Best of the Great Decade," p. 69.

reform."[141] James M. Hutchisson feels that Arrowsmith's struggle could be read as an allegory of Lewis's own. Just as Arrowsmith cannot decide whether to use his skills to heal people or to devote himself to pure research, Lewis had to divide his time between writing stories for magazines and writing novels.[142] In a society which has defined success exclusively in terms of material prosperity, the creative spirit is soon defeated. Work has only one purpose, namely to produce more material wealth. If someone chooses to devote his time to work that has no predictable end and no tangible or practical results, he will receive the disapproval of his peers. The artist faces much the same predicament as the scientist. A work of art does not necessarily have a value that can be easily measured and estimated. How many artists have lived in poverty, practically starving, because their work was never acknowledged and valued in their own time? But the artist who is dedicated to his work does not care about material gain as long as he is allowed to continue his work. In fact, for an artist to experience success in terms of wealth is perhaps not desirable at all. Once his work becomes common property, something that the public demand and are willing to pay for, he might feel that he has compromised his artistic integrity. He is a sell-out, a manufacturer of accessible and digestible "art." Embraced by the coarse and vulgar public, he feels that he has lost himself, lost his vision.

I imagine that a best-selling author like Lewis often struggled to preserve his dignity and confidence, always defending himself against the critics who questioned his talent. At the same time, it must be hard to resist the allure of wealth and fame. It must be tempting to keep turning over products that will satisfy the public, products that will sustain the flow of money. Why not give the public what the public wants? It is a question of supply and demand. Martin the scientist is forced to take a stand. Will he live according to the standards of his contemporary society or will he live according to his own ideals? Is he prepared to sacrifice

[141] "The Best of the Great Decade," p. 70.
[142] *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, pp. 106-107.

his prospects of wealth and fame in favor of his search for truth? In the end, Martin does not feel comfortable receiving praise for his efforts in St. Hubert because in his own view he has failed. He has not accomplished what he set out to accomplish. Thus, the attention he gets, the hero status that he can pride himself on, and all the other perks and benefits that follow in the wake of the St. Hubert incident, mean nothing to him. Martin feels like a fraud, much like an author who knows that his latest work of fiction is second-rate would feel when his name appears on top of the best-seller lists.

It seems to me that Martin, in his quest for truth and his desire to find the underlying principle, that is, the principle that explains a phenomenon, is trying to create order in an otherwise chaotic universe: "He wanted to look behind details and impressive-sounding lists of technical terms for the causes of things, for general rules which might reduce the chaos of dissimilar and contradicting symptoms to the orderliness of chemistry" (110). He keeps asking himself about the nature of truth, not to say the value of truth. Holding on to his faith, he never loses hope that there is meaning, that the universe makes sense. He has a clear advantage compared to Carol and Babbitt; his work gives him purpose and direction, something both Carol and Babbitt lack but desperately want. Martin is never disheartened by the prospect that there may not be an end to his work, that he may never find what he is looking for. Because he believes that the work he does in the laboratory is good in itself, not as a means toward an end but as an end in itself, he is not result-oriented but process-oriented. The questions he asks are more important to him than the potential answers he might find. Gottlieb tells him that "the most important part of living is not the living but pondering upon it" (34). Martin's work provides him with meaning, but it also makes him ask questions about the importance of his endeavors:

> Yes, does it really matter? Does truth matter – clean, cold, unfriendly truth, Max Gottlieb's truth? Everybody says, 'Oh, you mustn't tamper with the truth,' and everybody is furious if you hint that they themselves are tampering with it. Does anything matter, except making love and sleeping and eating and being flattered? (225)

Because his work is not properly valued by the people around him, he sometimes has doubts whether or not there is any point in his going on. The question "Does truth matter?" is closely linked with questions such as "What is the meaning of life?" Early on in the novel, Martin sees "no one clear path to Truth but a thousand paths to a thousand truths far-off and doubtful" (18). The notion that all truth is relative corresponds to the existentialist belief that life has no inherent meaning and that each individual must create meaning in his or her own life. In science, the goal seems to be objective and verifiable truth, but Martin is aware that objective truth is, more often than not, subject to interpretation. Furthermore, no one can ever hope to possess any claims to truth; truth does not belong to any one. No one can aspire to grasp the whole truth because the whole truth, even as a concept, transcends our capacity for knowledge.[143] His working methods take into consideration possible "variables." Through his pondering, he reaches a conclusion:

> He insisted that there is no Truth but only many truths; that Truth is not a colored bird to be chased among the rocks and captured by its tail, but a skeptical attitude toward life. He insisted that no one could expect more than, by stubbornness or luck, to have the kind of work he enjoyed and an ability to become better acquainted with the facts of that work than the average job-holder. (271)

The subject of *Arrowsmith* is in many ways similar to that of *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. The setting has slightly changed, but Martin is, just like Carol and Babbitt, the frustrated individual who cannot accept a life of conformity and thus tries to break free from the restraints of society. The outcome of *Arrowsmith* is different from the earlier novels, however. Lewis's treatment of his subject also seems different. His approach is still to a large extent satirical, especially in his portrayal of characters such as Pickerbaugh. Satire is very effective when exposing the conditions of society and passing judgment on those conditions. But Lewis's portrayal of Martin also contains a dimension of realism, as if the author has great respect and admiration for the kind of idealistic person that Martin is or tries to be. Martin is not necessarily his mouthpiece, as Carol was, and he is not the object of his satire, as Babbitt

[143] See George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, Continental European Philosophy series (Chesham, Buckinghamshire: Acumen, 2005), p. 14.

was. The satire is still poignant and to the point, but it is not quite as loud as previously. In my opinion, *Arrowsmith* is perhaps too sentimental. Lewis's hero is often too melodramatic to be a convincing hero. It is as if Lewis wanted to be taken seriously so badly that his artistic subject suffered. His inclination toward romanticism is perhaps most evident in the relationship between Leora and Martin, which seems an idealized and not very realistic relationship. Their feuds are mostly petty arguments about Martin's jealousy and his susceptibility to the charms of other women. Otherwise, the two of them are perfectly happy and often tend to speak the language of teenage lovers. This subtracts from the total experience of the novel because it adds a flavor of sentimentality. The satire of *Babbitt* was more effective because no one, not even Babbitt, was exempt from the author's swift pen and harsh judgment.

It seems like *Arrowsmith* confirms the picture Lewis has drawn of American society in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. The American milieu is stifling, the individual is forced into conformity, certain rules and standards apply, and any deviation from those standards is soon suppressed by the forces of society. However, because Martin is a character of a different caliber than both Carol and Babbitt, he is able to come up with a solution, even though it may be argued that this is not a satisfactory solution. In any case, Martin's stubbornness allows him to insist on his right to exert the freedom to choose for himself. At times, he wavers and tries to follow orders or to live up to certain expectations, but most of the time, he refuses to be bullied into doing anything that does not agree with his convictions. He defies authorities and makes more enemies than friends. His professional integrity does not allow him to take part in any popularity contest. With Martin it seems as if Lewis has come full circle. Through the course of three novels, he had illustrated the conditions of American society. The destinies of Carol, Babbitt, and Martin Arrowsmith show slightly different outcomes for the

discontented individual: in Carol's and Babbitt's case, some kind of maladjustment, and, in Martin's case, a total rejection of society.

CONCLUSION

In this conclusion, I want to provide a larger context for the novels and for the predicament the protagonists have had to face: how to come to terms with their existence. In *Main Street*, *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*, Sinclair Lewis concerned himself with the recurring conflict between the individual and its society. The demands of society and the individual's interests, concerns and private projects often clash. The question remains, how do we solve this conflict of interests without compromising ourselves? I have already hinted at two philosophical traditions that might help shed some light on Lewis's writing: existentialism and utilitarianism. These two seemingly different traditions ultimately deal with the same disturbing questions: how do we choose a path in life and how do we justify that choice? Standing before what seems to be an endless multitude of options, how do we figure out the best way to live our lives? Lewis was an author who clearly defended the individual's right to choose. He seems to have feared that the individual's freedom would be infringed on, that in American society there could be no true freedom. Carol, Babbitt and Arrowsmith have to face the fact that because human beings live in society with others and depend upon each other's benevolence and cooperative spirit in order to make human relations work, certain things are expected from each and everyone of us that might not agree with our personal convictions and might interfere with our personal goals. The outcome of these three novels leaves the reader with a negative impression of the individual's possibilities. Lewis's verdict on the condition of American society does not leave much hope that it would be possible to retain a sense of one's own individuality and at the same time be a valuable member of society.

Existentialism deals with the individual's painful discovery that life has no inherent meaning and that it is up to each of us to find a fulfilling purpose and thus create meaning in our lives. As I have already argued, it seems that both Carol and Babbitt desperately want a purpose. They long to feel that their efforts are not futile, that they make important

contributions to their communities. Carol seeks to reform Gopher Prairie and shape it according to her own ideas of perfection. Babbitt takes it upon himself, at least for a brief period, to defend the workers and their claims, to speak up against injustice. That both of them fail to bring about any lasting changes is a fact that seems to reflect partially on society and partially on their own weaknesses and flaws. Trying to make sense of life, Carol and Babbitt focus perhaps too single-mindedly upon the prospect of self-fulfillment. This is not to imply that self-fulfillment cannot be successfully sought, but it nevertheless has to happen within the bounds of what is acceptable in our society. If we are not happy with the terms life offers us, we still have to find a way to live with those terms. Compromise is not necessarily a defeat. Adjusting our expectations to better fit reality is a survival mechanism. Unfortunately, both Carol and Babbitt face such strong resistance that they are unable to fulfill their projects in a successful way. Lewis portrayed a society which did not seem to allow the individual enough space. To him, it seems, the American environment was so stifling it tended to smother any attempt at individuality, creativity, or original thought.

Lewis's characters are not without fault, either. Carol seems too self-absorbed to realize that when her personal interests are at odds with the predominant interests of her community, it is necessary for her to reevaluate her position in order that she might come up with a solution that would satisfy all parties involved. She is too stubbornly convinced that her values and standards are superior to the ones favored by the villagers to see that it would be unfair to everyone else if her ideas were implemented, no questions asked. It is hard to say to what degree Lewis agreed with Carol, but, as previously mentioned, it seems he did not necessarily mean to assert that she is justified in all her criticisms of the townspeople. He tries to balance her perspective with that of some of the other characters. Carol faces the same problem that a utilitarian philosopher would have to try to solve: how do we act in order to make sure that everyone's interests, including our own, are tended to? In the utilitarian

tradition, the end of all human activity is defined as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." That is, the morally right action is the one that promotes happiness for as many people as possible.[144] The task still remains for the philosopher to define what happiness is and also to deal with such difficult matters as how to protect the individual from becoming a sacrificial victim in the name of the public good. Happiness has often been identified with pleasure or the absence of pain, but later philosophers have tried to give a wider definition that includes not just physical well-being but also intellectual pursuits and the cultivation of virtues.[145] Be that as it may, the idea is that sometimes we have to raise our gaze from our immediate circumstances and that, taking in the consequences of our actions, not just in our own lives but in the lives of others, we must realize that sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice our own interests because pursuing those interests would not be beneficent to the public good. Initially, Carol seems bent on having things her way or not at all, but by the end of the novel she has realized that nothing will ever be achieved by her opposing her fellow villagers in everything they say and do. Rather, she now tries to adjust to their way of life. It is not that her idealism is dead or that she does not still have aspirations, but she has recognized the necessity of compromise.

In existentialism, there is a concern with the individual's freedom to choose, but there is also the realization that freedom comes with responsibility. That is, we are free to choose who and what we want to be, but when we make that choice, we also have to accept responsibility for our own existence. Rather than allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the possibilities before us, we need to take charge of our own lives. Babbitt has to realize that the freedom to choose cannot be interpreted as the freedom to refrain from choosing. He has to own up to the fact that not choosing, letting yourself be swept away by the tides of life and going wherever the current will take you, is in itself a choice. It is time for him to assert his freedom to

[144] See Geoffrey Scarre, *Utilitarianism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-25.
[145] *Ibid*, pp. 88-95.

choose, but because he has postponed that choice for too long, he has deprived himself of so many options that the most sensible thing for him to do is to choose the life that he has already made for himself. The difference is that now he makes a conscious choice and embraces his life with all its aspects and implications, accepting it for what it is. Even if that choice is dictated by his own weakness and desire for convenience, it is important to Babbitt's self-esteem that he believes that he has returned to his post on his own initiative, of his own free will. After a period of various distractions keeping him from making some really difficult decisions about his life, he finally comes to terms with being Babbitt.[146]

Martin Arrowsmith is the character who perhaps most forcefully has to reject the demands of society and insist on his right to pursue his own goals. If we take into consideration the utilitarian slogan "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" when passing judgment on his actions, it seems that however selfish he sometimes appears, what the people around him fail to recognize is that he might accomplish a lot more towards a common goal, that is, finding a cure for all illness, if he is allowed to do things his own way. There are plenty of examples in the novel of men who use the utilitarian slogan as an alibi when what they really seek to promote is their own success and not everyone's well-being. Most of the time, Martin seems more interested in his work as an end in itself than in the possible consequences of the discoveries he might come across, but there are other times when he displays a genuine concern with questions of how to benefit the human race with his findings, as for instance when he finds a new "god" in Sondelius and desires to join his "war on disease" (170). Martin's ideals do not necessarily clash with the demands of society in the aim of his work, but rather in his methods. The scientist is able to see that sometimes immediate pain-relief must be sacrificed in favor of long-term solutions, a belief neither the capitalists nor the general public are likely to share.

[146] See Pattison, pp. 53-54, 59-61, 70, 90-95.

Utilitarianism, interpreted in a certain way, is not quite as much at odds with Lewis's concern with individual freedom as it might seem.[147] Happiness is to be found not only through self-denial and self-sacrifice, but primarily through self-realization. It appears that rather than denying the individual the right to pursue his or her own goals, utilitarianism encourages it. A happy person is much more fit to help others and contribute to the general good than a miserable person. Also, if happiness is the end of all human activity, that happiness includes individual happiness, it does not necessarily transcend it. What utilitarianism really does, then, is to provide the proper frames within which our self-realization can take place. It prevents us from selfishly pursuing our own happiness while disregarding that of our fellow human beings. Taking shape during the French Revolution and the period of Enlightenment, utilitarianism might be interpreted as an attempt to prevent the exploitation of the many by the privileged few. One of its main claims is that everyone's interests should count – and count equally. The problem, one which cannot easily be solved, is to determine how much it is reasonable to expect of each individual: how much self-sacrifice? Also, since everyone's interests count equally, our actions should serve everyone's interests indiscriminately – but where do we draw the line? When does a chosen course of action become purely self-serving instead of serving the general good?

Is the failure of his characters to see themselves as part of a larger context also Lewis's own failure to perceive that as human beings we have certain obligations towards each other, moral obligations that we cannot escape? There is no such thing as total freedom. Because we choose to live in society with others, we have to construct our lives around laws and regulations to make sure that at least everyone's primary needs are satisfied. It does not follow that because human beings know the difference between right and wrong, they will always choose to do what is morally right and good. That is why we need to adjust our

[147] See Scarre, Chapter 8: "Utilitarianism and Personality," pp. 182-202

conduct according to certain rules. We cannot do as we please without any regard to the consequences. Does Carol or Babbitt ever reach such a conclusion? They both sense that they can no longer endure to stand alone outside their respective communities, and they also seem to realize that in order for them to be welcomed back into these communities they need to abandon certain ideas and attitudes that will not be tolerated by their peers. However, the ending of both *Main Street* and *Babbitt* is subject to interpretation, that is, we cannot know whether, according to Lewis, Carol and Babbitt have been utterly defeated or might be said to have had a limited victory in their defeat. Even though they both recognize their own dependence on others, not to say on others' benevolence, it seems too farfetched to claim that either one of them fully comprehends the interdependence of human relations. They seem to stop short at the realization that they have to make a compromise without understanding *why*.

If *Arrowsmith* is somehow the end of the journey for Lewis, that is, the conclusion he reaches after grappling with the same questions over the course of three novels, then it might be fair to say that in insisting on the individual's freedom from *all* obligations, he, like his characters, was unable to take in some of the facts of the human condition. Withdrawal from society is not a satisfactory solution, since little can be achieved if one disengages completely from all human association. Lewis worried, and not without cause, that in modern society the individual is forced to relinquish his or her individuality, that our choices are made for us, and that we are all molded into conformity. However, freedom to choose is not the equivalent to unrestricted freedom. There has to be a balance between freedom and obligation, between individual choice and the demands of society.

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